Stories of Resilience: Presented to the
10th Annual Education Graduate Student
Symposium
On
March 6, 2009
By
Audrey J. Siemens
The idea of resilience is a popular theme in today’s society. How to develop resilience, how to maintain resilience despite adversity and how to respond with resilience are among the common questions. “Life is like mountain climbing. Fulfilment is achieved by relentless dedication to the ascent, sometimes slow, painful step, by slow, painful step. Why do some people persist while others fall short? Unfortunately, when faced with life’s challenges, most people stop short before they have tested their limits and contributed their utmost.” (Stoltz, 1997, p 5)

Educators are a group who are dispensing much time and effort into examining the capacity of resilience among children and young people. “Today we are facing a crisis of hope. It’s time to take a good hard look at what has changed, to prepare for some sizeable roadblocks, so that you can ultimately break through, continue your ascent, and persevere.” (Stoltz, 1997, p 38) The process of continuing one’s ascent and enduring trials is often the topic of experts. Experts in resilience literature speculate as to why some individuals can attain it while others cannot. We are left wondering if these claims actually represent the individuals or are a mere interpretation by experts. I came to a realisation that what was missing was a study on the individuals themselves. A phenomenological study about how adversity affects individuals and how some can manage to overcome became the topic of my study. I felt that by utilising the stories of the individuals themselves much could be learned about resilience. I was curious to see whether through the process of reflecting, individuals would be able to articulate the profound changes necessary in becoming resilient individuals. The authenticity of the feedback would hopefully influence how we as educators would look at the way young people attain resiliency and overcome adversity.
I began my study by looking through past as well as present literature on resilience. The history of resilience and how it has been viewed in our society for the past several decades was of utmost importance in my study. From the start, I found out that research on resilience had focused on ways of understanding what distinguishes resilience in some children and what seems to hamper resilience among children.

About four decades ago, resilience was viewed from a deficit-based perspective. Children and youth that reacted negatively were considered to be at risk. Adult responses tended to be punitive and disrespectful. As a result of these attitudes towards them, children did not learn to develop positive relationships with the adults involved in their lives, namely parents and teachers. The programs designed to treat these deficits were ineffective. Boot camps, zero tolerance policies and harsh punishment failed to produce positive affects. Once acquired, it was believed that the deficits if extinguished could lead to resilience within young people. “Given the widespread use of the risk orientation to determine funding and available resources to help students at risk, it was reasonable then to expect that key academic and health and safety indices would show improvement” (Brown, E’Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001, p5). Unfortunately, this approach did not lead to improvement among at risk children. Rather, this deficit approach led to more deficit behaviour; the very thing educators were trying to extinguish.

Shortly after, research began to evolve that pointed to a different way of thinking about children. Studies began to focus on strengths rather than deficits. Key researchers such as Benard began to focus on the strengths children and youth. “A landmark study now spanning four decades has followed the development of children born on the
Hawaiian Island of Kauai since 1955. This study revealed that one-third of the children labelled as high risk developed well in terms of getting along with parents, peers, doing well in school and with overall mental health. This resilient group, now grown up, has continued to do well although they have found that the resilient adults from trouble families appear to be more cautious about marriage and intimacy, and also report health problems and could be stress related.” (Masten, 1997, p 2) Overall, researchers found that many of these children possessed strong resources, which enabled them to become resilient despite experiencing adversity in their lives. Focusing on their strengths helped the children and adults not only become resilient but also maintain resiliency in their lives.

This strength-based perspective worked well with three theoretical constructs I decided to incorporate into my study. They consisted of the following: attachment theory, locus of control theory and self-efficacy theory. Furthermore, by utilising an action research orientation, (Stringer, 2004), and a narrative inquiry approach, (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000), my research focused specifically on the ability of young people to develop resilience. By encouraging the subjects to look back at their past experiences, this provided me with an opportunity to attain a deeper understanding of how they view their lives. “Research, more formally, can be defined as a process of systematic investigation leading to increased understanding of a phenomenon or issue of interest”(Stringer, 2004, p 3). The narrative inquiry approach also enabled myself as a researcher to support the four subjects, all women, as they shared recollections of their lives as students and young adults. Constructing narratives of their lived experiences throughout their schooling brought forward the theme of resilience. This theme was
further resonated in each of the four subjects as they shared their unique perspective in order to make sense of the key elements in their narratives. These narratives provided specific incidents that clarified what it was like for them to grow up and develop and attain resiliency.

The big picture of this research strongly featured the *individual* perspectives rather than those created by the interpretation of experts. These unique perspectives demonstrated how these young people viewed their lives and how they interpreted their own personal journey. Each subject related stories of adversity such as difficulty with parents, peers, personal issues such as stuttering, and difficulty with their schooling and a lack of success. The perspectives of the young women resonated in the innovative, meaningful data that was created. The heart-warming stories, using their own words, established an authenticity when contrasted with the stories re-told by experts. I also found that the women’s’ stories reflected their view of how relationships affected them throughout their lives. I found my study spoke about the importance of relationships similar to the study conducted by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule in the 1970’s. “For many women, the real and valued lessons learned did not necessarily grow out of their academic work, but in relationships with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvement’s.” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986, p4).

I decided to focus on these valued lessons, namely the stories of how relationships affected the women in the study. I chose to focus on the development of relationships within each of the subjects. The commonalties that existed within the stories included the positive role of teachers and mentors throughout their school years, the positive education experiences and the positive peer experiences. Attachment theory seemed to provide the
fundamental reason the subjects in my study wanted to foster relationships in their lives. As humans, we all desire and want relationships in our lives. Attachment theory research suggests that everyone needs caring relationships in order to thrive. Past research studies of children in orphanages suggests that not only do children not thrive emotionally without human touch and care but that children will also not thrive physically. The work on Attachment theory originated with the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby insisted that attachment was necessary for natural and healthy relationships not just in childhood but later on in life. He described attachments as secure, insecure or not yet attachments. According to Byrd and Harvey (2000), “If the infant develops a secure attachment with the primary caregiver, it is likely that secure attachment with others will follow.” This attachment also seemed to suggest that the subjects would become more successful in developing positive relationships as they grew up. The subjects in my study spoke about the secure attachments they had gleaned early on in their lives. They had all experienced a secure attachment to a parent, which became a tremendous sense of security for them. Later on, they all spoke about their attachments to others and how these continued to be important in their lives.

Locus of control also proved to relate well to resilience literature. This theory was derived from Rotter’s Social Learning Theory in 1954. Since then, many researchers have contributed to Rotter’s theories leading to the construct of the Healthy Locus of Control in 1976. Locus of control referred to the persons’ attribution of causes for the things that happen in their life either to internal (personal) or external (contextual) factors. The development of an internal locus of control as opposed to an external locus of control was thought to be central to the findings of this study. Although adversity was common to
each participant, each of the subjects admitted to a turning point in which they realised their ability to form an internal locus of control. They also recognised their ability to become in charge of their own lives. This study showed how the ability to form a strong internal locus of control helped each subject through the crises in their lives.

The development of a strong personal self-efficacy also seemed to relate to how each of the subjects was able to believe in their own unique ability to develop their own capabilities and how they grew to accept their own abilities. “Perceived self-efficacy concerns people’s beliefs in their capabilities to product given attainments” (Pastorelli, Caprar, Barbaranelli, Rola, Rozsa & Bandura, 2001, p 87). Each of the subjects was found to, despite situations of adversity, come to a point in their lives where they were satisfied with their own abilities so that they could continue to work through problems without losing their resiliency.

As an educator, I had a strong desire to delve into what supported them in their journey and what we as educators could do to further help them achieve resiliency. The four young women were recommended to me for the study due to their ability to possess insight into their own lives despite having had situations of adversity. As I met with each one of them, I was fascinated with how they felt and what they felt contributed to their resiliency over the years.

In order to most effectively help them share their story in their own way, I chose an open-ended question format. Each subject participated in two interviews. The purpose of the first interview was to enable them to share the experiences as they remembered them. The purpose of the second interview was to ask them to listen to the narrative I constructed of their story and for them to add further recollections that had meaning for
them. Each participant admitted that although some of these experiences affected them deeply, after they had reached a turning point, they found acceptance and a positive outlook on life. Each of the participants also spoke about their experiences of adversity as they reflected back to their childhood and adolescence. They spoke about home experiences as well as school experiences. Each of them also spoke about the choices they made as to what particular events or incidents they wanted to share. Some of the subjects managed to recall past stories with incredible detail.

The following excerpts reflected how each one of the subjects came to the realisation that they had reached a turning point. Kaley, one of the subjects, stated in her first interview, “So I feel if back in high school, like I, I definitely stand up for myself now that I did before. Life, I’ve had a lot of disappointments in my life, but then also I know how to change that.” (1st interview with Kaley, p 11). Alice spoke about how once she realised that people’s opinions were simply their opinions; she was able to take control. “To be able to, you know, it’s usually like before you know people’s opinions have a lot of effect on you and therefore they control your decisions and whatever you do, but now it’s like you know, yeah, I’m in control of my life.” (1st interview with Alice, p 17). Christy learned about her character strengths in the process of becoming resilient. “I believe in myself whenever I’m, like something rough. Like I know I can surpass it and keep going down, yeah the good road and I wouldn’t just give up like that easily, you know, I’m actually quite stubborn, so. Yeah.” (1st interview with Christy, p 25). Elly admitted to having had a lot of issues in her teenage years. She spoke about how she in her adult years had finally gained control of her emotions. “Like I was pretty much an out of control teenager and I didn’t really have any control over my emotions at the time.
I’m hardly ever upset about anything. So . . . I’m pretty much, yeah in control.” (1st interview with Elly, p 18).

Overall, this data suggests that for all of the subjects, strong attachments were prevalent as they developed this strong internal locus of control. This was also evident in the excerpts as each subject recalled their home and their school experiences. Kaley in particular spoke highly about a special Gr. 8 teacher who really made a difference in her life. “She, (my Grade 8 teacher), was very optimistic about everything and she helped me out even without, even having school stuff going on, I would always come to her for things.” (1st interview with Kaley, p 8). Elly spoke about the impact of friendships in her life. “It’s amazing to have people who understand you and who you can be yourself around. It’s hard to find. . like people think friendship is something easy”. (2nd interview with Elly, p 28). Alice spoke about her mother and how her strong attachment to her helped her throughout her life. “I mean my mother, like she had my back 100% on everything. My Mom always made me feel like; she never made me feel like I couldn’t do anything. Like she made me feel like I could do whatever I wanted to.” (1st interview with Alice, p 16). Not only did each of these excerpts express the importance of strong attachments; it spoke about how they really felt and how they attributed meaning to their relationships. Each participant was empowered to feel that they were valued as an individual. In turn, each subject was able to truly develop his or her own identity and voice. As an action researcher, I was interested in validating them in their recollections of their previous experiences and making them feel that their stories were meaningful, not only to me but to themselves. I wanted the participants to share what was the most
meaningful in their lives and to explore how these experiences shaped who they were as individuals.

The script presented to each participant helped set the tone in sharing his or her experiences. At the beginning of the first interview, I read this script to each of the subjects: *I am interested in your view of your life story. I would like you to share events, beginning from your earliest memories, of your life experiences, things that happened to you that stand out as important for you.* In order for the participants to value their own story, I decided to read it back to them in the second interview. This provided an opportunity for each subject to feel proud of their accomplishments and how they had overcome adverse situations. Each narrative script became a valued part of my thesis. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to share one of the narrative scripts as it brought forth the significance of Elly’s journey of resilience:

*I would like to thank you Elly, for sharing your life story with me. I wrote this story because I wanted to understand your perspective of your life. I thought I would piece it together and share it with you. Hopefully, these impressions describe you and how people and events have shaped your life. You described your early childhood experiences as being hard to remember as you were born in New Zealand and didn’t recall much about your first few years. You recalled how your parents divorced when you were around four years of age. A series of moves in your life then took place, first to Edmonton for a year, then to Winnipeg where you and your mother moved in with your grandmother (for your Kindergarten year), then to River Heights where you moved in with your new step dad (for the next four years) and then to St. Vital where your parents still reside. You recalled how you attended two different schools in St. Vital, one for*
grade five and grade six and one for junior high. Your high school years were spent attending schools associated with your various home placements.

You mentioned that you didn’t really like school, as it was really hard for you. You recalled that you didn’t have friends in elementary school until you got to grade six. The best year of schooling was in grad six where you had supportive teachers and friends.

When you were in grade one your Mom wanted you assessed for learning disabilities. She had experienced difficulty with learning so she wanted to have you assessed as soon as possible. You were found to have ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and to have difficulty with reading. You were also found to have speech difficulties and you recalled a story of how kids laughed at you for trying to say the word, crayon. You attended a special program in grade four for half days and you attended school for the other half day. Other children you felt were mean to you and you felt very segregated from the rest of the children as you attended only half days with them. Teachers and resource teachers did not seem supportive to you during these years.

When you moved schools in grade five, you had a teacher who did not understand that you needed to move around due to your Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This was very frustrating for you as she used to yell at you. You felt that you were not moving intentionally and that although doodling or doing something would have helped, the teacher did not allow you to do that. Grade six was the year you had your favourite teacher. You remembered that she kept you in the class and would have the resource teacher work with you there. You also had good friends and you described this time in your life as “one of my favourite years in school ever”.
After grade six, you and your friends were all moved to different junior high schools. This was difficult as that meant you were all split up – some in one school and some in another. School became very difficult for you again as you described that grade six being the only year that you had friends and then to be put into a school where you didn’t know anybody. A conflict with some girls led to complete isolation in grade seven.

In grade eight, you found a best friend. You described how friendship was so important to you as you had experienced so few friends up until that point. Your friend and you were not the right “combination” and you began to get into trouble like skipping school, smoking and drinking.

Your Mom sent you to New Zealand during the summer of your grade eight-year and you felt a lot of separation anxiety being away from her. When you got back you got into trouble with the law and you were not to be with your best friend. You hung out with her anyway and the court ordered you to go to a locked up group home where you attended school. While you were there you received another diagnosis, bi-polar disorder. You were put on medication and you found that when you began to study, you were getting good marks for the first time in your life. You began to realise that there was more to you than getting in trouble and hanging out with friends and doing stuff that you shouldn’t have done. You then moved to a foster home and continued to do well in school. You stopped your medication and found you did not get into trouble. You had a boyfriend you was in trouble with the law and you then discovered you were pregnant with your daughter.

Faced with the decision of whether to have her or not, you came to a point where you decided there was more to life and that you wanted to be a mother. When she was
about a year and a half you started a program called “Take Charge” where mothers on social assistance can finish off their education. You had some difficulty getting along with a girl in the program and decided you could finish off your grade twelve in Adult Education. Graduating in 2006, you were proud of your accomplishments. You gave birth to your son shortly after and are currently waiting until he is two years old before going back to school or work.

Interests such as tap-dancing which was important to you in your childhood are still important to you. Making crafts and working on art related activities have also made you feel successful. Your mother has been a great source of support throughout your life, especially when you experienced crises. The birth of your daughter especially came at a time when your mother and step dad supported you throughout that process which was helpful for you. You described your mother as "she had my back 100% on everything." Friends became more important to you as you grew older. The two friends that you met in the “Taking Charge” program became like your “family” and you all were best friends. They are people that you confide in and you get together with as they have children as well. They have become like a support network to you.

You speak about being in control of your emotions at this point in your life to the extent that you hardly ever are anxious or upset about anything. Education too is now something you fell in control of whereas you feel for most of your earlier school life you could not grasp concepts and you felt very frustrated. You also now feel capable of doing things and making decisions. You are looking forward to planning what you will do when your son gets a bit older and you want to look at other things in your life. When asked what you wanted to add you spoke about the time when you realised you were not
alone. You realised there were others who had similar difficulties and that you were smart and always had been. You spoke of how shocked you were when others asked for your help and you realised that you could help others as well.

Elly’s narrative spoke about the many things she encountered in her life. The reoccurring theme in her story reflected the dilemma of not having friends to grow up with. Throughout her challenging experiences, Elly came to the realisation that she was her own person and she found happiness in knowing that she had many abilities. She felt she had managed to overcome her difficulties with school. She found individuals in similar circumstances and was able to glean support. She felt great pride in sharing how she finished high school in 2006. Overall, she admitted to having overcome various adverse situations and feeling that she was finally in control of her life.

The power of relationships was particularly evident in Elly’s story. She was able to identify people in her life that had truly impacted her. Elly also spoke about the importance of teachers in her life. She spoke about how important relationships were with teachers and how the first teacher who made an impact was her Gr. 6 teacher. In an article by Heather Libbey on “Measuring Student Relationships to School: Attachment, Bonding, Connectedness and Engagement”, the author mentions several factors that were measured in order to determine a child’s connectedness to school. “Teacher support was the most common theme that emerged from the variables reviewed. Student relationships with school often were operationalized as their relationships with their teachers”(Libbey, 2004, p 281).

The significance of peers to resiliency was evident throughout the stories as well. All of the women spoke about both positive and negative relationships with their peers
and how these affected them. Elly chose to speak at length about the value of friendship with peers. “It’s amazing to have people who understand you and who you can be yourself around. It’s hard to find. Like people think friendship is something easy”. (2nd interview with Elly, p 28). On the other hand, negative peer relationships also seemed to have a strong effect on each of the participants. Dr Gordon Neufeld in his book, “Hold onto your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More than Peers”, speaks about what happens when children or teens are weakly attached to a caregiver. He describes how children can gravitate to peers, stop listening to their parents and become peer orientated. Peers are then looked to provide nurturance and guidance instead of a parent. This becomes problematic, as peers are most often incapable of providing appropriate assistance. The concept of peer orientation may then take over as a direct result of the child having a weak attachment to his/her parents or caregivers. Children, not securely attached to their caregivers, can become at risk of becoming peer orientated.

My data also suggests that each subject was also able to attain self-efficacy as they spoke about how they now believe in themselves and can make choices and decisions for themselves. Overall, the unique perspectives provided by each subject were fundamental in looking at the topic of resiliency. Although each subject was very different, many of the subjects spoke about similar experiences that were meaningful to them.

These stories gave me as an educator, a fresh perspective in terms of looking at how we as educators can assist young people. It also gave me valuable insight as to how we as educators need to look at the existing strategies and programs on resiliency within our schools and our communities. The stories of resilience brought forth a number of
thoughts as to what is helpful to young people during their journey. The positive role models provided by not only parents but by mentors in the schools was both enlightening and disheartening. Overall, the relationship with the teacher seemed to be a key factor in the lives of my subjects. Teachers appear to be of greater influence than the programs and curriculum’s. Interestingly, while all the subjects spoke at length about the positive teachers in their lives, not one of the subjects mentioned a program that helped them. Credit was given mainly to the positive adults who assisted them in their lives. Positive school experiences provided by these positive role models were also cited as being important in their growth and development. Stories reflecting times when the subjects were given a chance to prove themselves and to succeed at something stood out in the mind of the subjects.

Factors in my study that proved to be important for their attainment of resiliency mainly focused on the importance of positive relationships with supportive parents, supportive teachers and supportive friends. My data strongly demonstrates that relationships with caring adults was key in this process. The turning point that occurred for each of the women further suggests that supportive adults become of utmost importance at certain times in their lives. Fortunately, for each of the participants, they were able to access supportive adults throughout the process of becoming resilient.

The findings of this research also suggest some interesting ways to explore how to develop resilience within students in our schools. Although this study focused on the personal stories of four women, the stories of their schooling experiences suggested that there were a number of areas that could be further explored by educators. In looking at the way these women looked at their childhood school experiences, educators could
surmise that relationship building was of utmost important in helping these women attain or not attain success. How they responded to adversity or learned to respond to adversity over time also becomes important in this study. My results of this research suggest that it is definitely beneficial to study the individual perceptions of young adults. This study demonstrates how meaningful the actual *voices* of young people can be.

Sadly, so often our young people are underrepresented in today’s research. The importance of relationships was so evident in their voices. The women chosen in the study welcomed the idea of sharing their life story. In addition, I felt they acquired a sense of pride as to who they had become as resilient individuals. They demonstrated that they had attained an internal locus of control, personal self-efficacy and a sense of optimism and hardiness in the process of becoming resilient. “Study after study have proven that those individuals who respond to adversity as an opportunity and with a sense of purpose and control will remain strong, no matter what happens.”(Barbara Bowes, 2009)
References


