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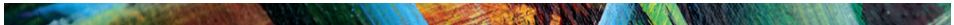


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Schools, solidarity, and resilience: Understanding why and how we can develop children's potential

Schulen, Solidarität und Resilienz: Verstehen, warum und wie
wir das Potenzial von Kindern fördern können

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Abstract

Neoliberalism has had a profoundly fracturing impact on our societies and communities. People, including children, find themselves experiencing an increased sense of isolation and disconnect. These experiences are compounded by increasingly complex life challenges, including establishing a sense of identity, engaging in healthy relationships, defining and understanding success, as well as rights and responsibilities. The impact of these intersecting complexities is reflected, for example, in unprecedented rates of anxiety and depression, seen in children at ever younger ages. There is, however, an abundance of research demonstrating the powerful mitigating impact of relational resources – social connections – on life outcomes, including child well-being, in the face of these challenges. Much of this research is situated in the field of adverse childhood events and resilience. In both instances, this research focuses on individuals as well as the physical and social environments in which they live. This research has also highlighted the important role schools can play in the lives of all children, especially those facing exceptional life challenges. In this article, I will situate solidarity theory alongside resilience research and theory as they are relevant to schools. I will then explain how these approaches lend themselves to a strengths-based approach to establishing socially cohesive school environments that reflect a context of community resilience, one that facilitates personal well-being, empathy and, collectively, solidarity. I will conclude this with a guiding framework for establishing solidarity- or resilience-building schools.

Keywords: mental health promotion, resilience, solidarity, school communities, community resilience, social determinants of health

Zusammenfassung

Der Neoliberalismus hat unsere Gesellschaften und Gemeinschaften tiefgreifend gespalten. Menschen, darunter auch Kinder, fühlen sich zunehmend isoliert und entfremdet. Diese Erfahrungen werden durch immer komplexere Herausforderungen im Leben noch verstärkt, darunter die Entwicklung eines Identitätsgefühls, der Aufbau gesunder Beziehungen, die Definition und das Verständnis von Erfolg sowie von Rechten und Pflichten. Die Auswirkungen dieser sich überschneidenden Komplexitäten spiegeln sich beispielsweise in beispiellosen Raten von Angstzuständen und Depressionen wider, die bei immer jüngeren Kindern zu beobachten sind. Es gibt jedoch eine Fülle von Forschungsarbeiten, die den starken mildernden Einfluss von Beziehungsressourcen – sozialen Verbindungen – auf Lebensergebnisse, einschließlich des Wohlbefindens von Kindern, angesichts dieser Herausforderungen belegen. Ein Großteil dieser Forschung befasst sich mit negativen Kindheitserlebnissen und Resilienz. In beiden Fällen konzentriert sich die Forschung sowohl auf den Einzelnen als auch auf das physische und soziale Umfeld, in dem er lebt. Diese Forschung hat auch die wichtige Rolle hervorgehoben, die Schulen im Leben aller Kinder spielen können, insbesondere derjenigen, die mit außergewöhnlichen Herausforderungen konfrontiert sind. In diesem Artikel werde ich die Solidaritätstheorie neben die Resilienzforschung und -theorie stellen, da sie für Schulen relevant sind. Anschließend werde ich erläutern, wie sich diese Ansätze für einen stärkenorientierten Ansatz zur Schaffung eines sozial kohärenten Schulumfelds eignen, das die Resilienz der Gemeinschaft widerspiegelt und das persönliche Wohlbefinden, Empathie und kollektive Solidarität fördert. Abschließend werde ich einen Leitrahmen für die Schaffung solidarischer oder resilienzfördernder Schulen vorstellen.

Schlüsselwörter: Förderung der psychischen Gesundheit, Resilienz, Solidarität, Schulgemeinschaften, Resilienz der Gemeinschaft, soziale Determinanten von Gesundheit

Children and adolescents are confronted by multifaceted challenges arising from intersecting social, economic, and cultural determinants (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Empirical studies reveal that these determinants profoundly shape mental health trajectories, with inequities exacerbating risk exposure (Gautam et al., 2023). Additionally, research shows the central positioning of school environments either exacerbating or mitigating the impact of risk exposure (Raniti et al., 2022). This article presents a conceptual framework integrating upstream, midstream, and downstream approaches to mental health within educational contexts, informed by resilience and solidarity theory. By situating youth within relational, contextual, and systemic networks, this framework emphasizes the interplay of individual agency, social capital, and community capacity, highlighting the roles that teachers can play in mitigating risk impact. The article then integrates the role of solidarity theory and a related model of community resilience development, highlighting the role of school environments in supporting well-being outcomes for children and youth. In this article, community is understood to be the physical environments, or neighbourhoods, in which children, youth, and their families develop, learn, work, and play. The objective is to provide a theoretically grounded, evidence-informed approach to cross-sector interventions that enhance youth mental health and developmental outcomes in educational environments.

1 “My teacher knew”: The Contextual Environment of Children and Youth

Research shows that teachers often know about the challenges facing children and youth – both inside and outside the school context – but fail to intervene (Hoogsteyns et al., 2021). Research also highlights how it is often in school spaces where the stress young people face in their day-to-day lives combined with a lack of support, that they begin to draw on maladaptive coping mechanisms to achieve a sense of happiness and health, as well as a sense of purpose and belonging (Blum et al., 2022; Stapley et al., 2023).

This microcosm of experience witnessed in educational settings reflects our larger social reality. Neoliberalism has had a profound impact on our communities and the ways they function (Card & Hepburn, 2023), including the services tasked with responding to children (Jimenez & Schmitt, 2024). Policy and service provision have been impacted by an emphasis on individualization of risk, responsibility, and reward where the individual is held solely accountable for their outcomes; the introduction of market competition where public services are assessed as if they were for-profit companies; and, standardized monitoring and evaluation frameworks are used to gauge outcomes in ways that do not account for human and contextual factors at play (Card & Hepburn, 2023; Jimenez & Schmitt, 2024). This holds for schools as well (Mutuota, 2024; Sturrock, 2021).

Neoliberalism’s impact on community planning, employment structuring, and social design has fractured society (Joy, 2021; Su, 2023). Consequently, people have become compartmentalized, and the collective’s capacity to support those who are struggling has diminished (Card & Hepburn, 2023). What were once family and community functions regarding the scaffolding of children’s development, to engage in guidance, reflection and support, have been turned into marketable services provided at a cost. Rather than teachers, parents, and community members coming together, for example, to collectively support a young person facing challenges, we often relinquish this capacity to mandated professionals, such as social workers and psychologists.

Professionals, however, experience diminished capacity to provide relevant and practical support due to narrowly defined core competencies and mandates, situated within globally reproducible service models, mostly irrespective of context or culture. Core competencies and service provision mandates result in numerous reasons why professionals cannot help young people (Ahlbäck Öberg & Bringselius, 2015), including schools. Teachers are asked to focus exclusively on the transmission of the educational curriculum and skills at the expense of meaningful, empathetic, and authentic relationships with students (Anderson & Cohen, 2015). All the while, students are living in communities characterized by disconnection and fracture. The result is that we, as a society, are failing our young people, families, and the communities in which they live (Card & Hepburn, 2023).

2 Mental health and upstream supports of well-being

To help teachers respond to students' mental health needs, we need to consider what supports well-being. The World Health Organization (2013) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his/her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his/her community." Mental health is supported by the availability of key social and structural determinants (with political and economic underpinnings), and supportive, relevant, and accessible contextual factors (Kirkbride et al., 2024; McAllister et al., 2018; Slimmen et al., 2025).

Relatedly, upstream mental health promotion focuses on proactively creating the social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions that allow individuals and communities to thrive. They strengthen protective factors—such as social connection, cultural identity, safety, equitable access to education and housing, and opportunities for meaningful participation—while reducing systemic barriers and sources of stress (Dopp & Lantz, 2019; NCCDH, 2014; Ray et al., 2023). This approach prioritizes community-led, culturally grounded, and sustainable strategies that foster personal and collective capacities. By contrast, midstream approaches aim to reduce emerging risks and intervene early via community-based programs and services (Dopp & Lantz, 2019; Ray et al., 2023), and downstream components involve more reactive and specialized responses to existing mental health challenges (NCCDH, 2014).

Schools are uniquely positioned to provide upstream mental health supports because they offer daily environments that shape social, emotional, and academic experiences. Schools can cultivate a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusion; foster positive relationships; and actively celebrate cultural identity and diversity—all of which strengthen well-being (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Raniti et al., 2022). They can embed social and emotional learning, create opportunities for student voice and leadership, and build strong connections with families and communities to ensure culturally responsive supports (Raniti et al., 2022). Schools can also influence broader determinants of well-being by advocating for equitable policies that support all students. By nurturing environments where young people feel valued, connected, and empowered, schools act as key upstream promoters of wellbeing.

3 Individual resilience, solidarity theory and community resilience

Individual resilience

As explained elsewhere (Liebenberg, 2020), resilience research over the past six decades has demonstrated that human resilience comprises three core components: individual capacity, and relational and contextual resources. Each of these components comprise numerous elements. Individual capacity is characterized for example by cognitive abilities, executive function, problem-solving skills, positive affect, creative thinking, agency, and meaning-making frameworks. Relational resources include relationships with primary caregivers, siblings and extended family, peer group and friends, educators and mentors, and professional supports (Blum et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2024). However, effective resilience-promoting and supporting relationships are secure, trusting, nurturing, caring, stable, and accepting (Godor et al., 2024; Peleg & Peleg, 2025). Finally, contextual resources include educational opportunities, recreational resources, community cohesion, routine and structure, opportunities for religious, cultural, and civic engagement, as well as supportive socioeconomic factors, service provision, and related policy (Slimmen et al., 2025). Collectively, these various resources are situated in children's micro and macro contexts.

Three aspects regarding these components and elements show variation. First, which assets will promote good outcomes is shaped by context and culture. Second, the expectation is that these various assets will grow and develop over time, increasing an individual's capacity to manage adversity successfully. This development, however, is not age specific. Instead, it is facilitated by relationships and the access they facilitate to relevant resources. Finally, how these core components and their related elements are protective and promotive of positive outcomes, or harmful and undermining, depends on the unique blend of factors at play at a given time, in a given context (Liebenberg, 2020).

I have argued elsewhere that personal agency is central to this interactive process and includes an individual's meaning-making framework. Meaning-making frameworks, an individual's beliefs about the world, provide a frame of reference to help make sense of daily experiences, challenges and adversities as well as how to manage these in the subsequent decisions made and actions taken, be they positive or negative. The foundations of meaning-making frameworks are set in early life as babies and infants begin to perceive, understand, and interact with their world. These interactions shape how individuals make decisions in response to challenges, which resources they draw on and how they go about doing so. We can think of meaning-making frameworks as mechanisms that drive agency, which, in turn, shape the choice and use of available assets and resources to achieve well-being (Liebenberg, 2020; Zambelli et al., 2024). These frameworks and processes also evolve with time. As meaning is brought to an event, it shapes how resources are perceived and regarded as necessary for managing the situation. As resources are drawn on, they result in interactions with relationships and other resources, which, in turn, shape the meaning that is brought to subsequent events.

Accordingly, this cycle is profoundly shaped by both social interactions and the culture in which they occur. We cannot understand individual choices and behaviour without considering the broader social, political, economic, and cultural context in which that person is embedded (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Research on resilience processes demonstrates that relationships are central to fostering better outcomes for children and adolescents. It is

through relational resources that youth gain access to contextual resources, and through both, they gain experiences and feedback from which to develop personal assets (Liebenberg, 2020).

Solidarity Theory

Echoing the resilience process, solidarity theory broadly refers to a sense of unity and mutual support among individuals, often based on shared interests, values, or experiences. It emphasizes interdependence, shared awareness, and collective action, in which individual well-being is inherently linked to community structures and social change, and in which one experiences and understands oneself as part of a community (Avichail et al., 2024; Sangiovanni, 2025).

Solidarity involves recognizing and appreciating shared interests, goals, and values among members of a group or society, in this case, a school community (Avichail et al., 2024). It emphasizes that individuals are not isolated but are part of a larger system where their outcomes are intertwined. Therefore, solidarity inspires individuals to work together towards common goals, even if it means making sacrifices for the greater good (Veerman & Denessen, 2020). This, in turn, moves people beyond individualism; while recognizing individual identities, solidarity promotes a sense of unity that extends beyond self-interest. Through a sense of connection and belonging, solidarity provides individuals with a sense of purpose and motivation to participate in social change and collective action (Avichail et al., 2024) – facets recognized as important resilience components (Liebenberg, 2020).

These facets of solidarity theory and practice align with what we know about the transformative power of both solidarity and resilience, providing a framework for use in educational settings that focuses primarily on relational components, sense of community, and the roles they play in supporting healthier outcomes (Veerman & Denessen, 2020). Interactive resilience processes overlap with solidarity theory and the notion of transformative potential, particularly the key role of relationships in supporting access to contextual resources and the development of personal capacity (Veerman & Denessen, 2020). Within schools, solidarity manifests through relational cohesion, inclusive practices, and shared responsibility for youth development. By fostering social support and community, solidarity can mitigate adverse impacts on mental health (Birrell et al., 2025) by establishing community initiatives that foster a sense of belonging, support networks that help youth navigate challenges, and inclusive environments that celebrate diversity. By promoting connection, empathy, and mutual support, solidarity strengthens social bonds, enhances mental health, and contributes to overall well-being.

Community Resilience

Definitions of community resilience (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Magis, 2010) underscore the social connectedness inherent to community resilience as well as the flexibility that is required if communities are to successfully adapt to ever-changing challenges and highlight the role of both the immediate community as well as the larger macro systems that surround and underpin communities. These definitions also spotlight community resilience as comprising natural and political capital, as well as human, cultural, and social capital. These five capitals support community resilience as an adaptive and transformative process that manifests in social cohesion and social support networks, underpinned

by effective social networking and collaboration that collectively engage and activate the social levers necessary to establish relevant and accessible resilience-promoting resources for individuals. These levers include relevant and accessible physical resources for children, youth, and their families; social-emotional relational supports for children, youth, and their families; and opportunities for meaningful engagement in their civic, social, and cultural contexts (Liebenberg & Scherman, 2021).

As with individual resilience, the development of community resilience is a non-cyclical, non-linear process. It involves a complex, multifaceted web of context-specific social processes that are not static but fluctuate with community needs. Finally, community resilience is context- and culture-specific (Liebenberg & Scherman, 2021). Driving this process is adaptive capacity: the capacity of actors within a system to support change through social networks and learning communities. Adaptive capacity draws on an asset-based approach that integrates the five capitals. At the centre, or starting point, are human and social capital, serving as initiators of the resilience process. The intent is to enhance, expand, leverage, and use community capacities in ways that feed into an upward spiral of investment in overall capacity. To facilitate this spiral, human and social capital (staff, leadership and the organization itself) draw on sources of capital within and around the communities in which they are situated. They draw on sources of additional human capital in the form of stakeholders (i.e. community leadership, other service providers, and community members); political capital (stemming from community leadership and other organizations); and cultural capital (i.e. the knowledge needed to succeed within a particular social space).

As this investment grows, additional human resources and social capital can be integrated into the core resilience development components. A staggered or layered approach to this process means that as assets are developed and grown, they are better positioned, aligned and drawn upon to manage short-term shocks (such as suicides, floods, and fires) as well as long-term stressors (such as poverty, long working hours, and unhealthy relationships). Additionally, as with individual resilience, relational or social connections can augment and/or substitute for capitals that may be absent (Liebenberg & Scherman, 2021).

With these guidelines in mind, it is imperative to acknowledge the specific characteristics of educational systems and the institutions operating within them. Globally, most education systems today, as with other service systems, are characterized by neoliberal frameworks. As discussed earlier, these frameworks focus on specific academic outcomes (grades) for individuals rather than overall child development, social cohesion, and solidarity. This focus on outcomes is sustained and enforced across educational system hierarchies. These characteristics can pose significant barriers to implementing supports for solidarity within schools. Overcoming these barriers requires drawing especially on cultural capital. Understanding barriers posed education system within local school contexts can also serve to highlight ways around these barriers. In this regard, human, social and stakeholder capital can provide champions for this work, who can assist in navigating beyond system barriers.

4 In conclusion: Developing community resilience in schools

Schools are inherently relational sites. They are also among the most widely available services globally for youth. Additionally, they are spaces where youth report either finding new impetus and support in their lives or seeking maladaptive sources of support, belonging, and achievement. Research globally shows that students don't see teachers as detached professionals. They look to them as adults who participate in their lives, with the expectation that they should care, that they and the schools in which these interactions occur should be part of their supportive community (Blum et al., 2022), implicating community resilience in their well-being.

Schools can draw on community resilience processes to create spaces seemingly outside of their mandate, but that support the well-being of all students. Examples include the development of community gardens. Here, youth can learn about sustainable food systems, develop skills, and connect with peers while addressing some of their community's needs (Koay & Dillon, 2020). Another example includes mentoring programs in which mentors, including peers, guide other youth through challenges, exploration of solutions, and personal development, fostering a sense of empathy, understanding, and hope for the future and possibility for all involved (Earnshaw & Harrison, 2024). Finally, youth-led organizations tied to schools can empower youth to take initiative and lead community projects relevant to their community's needs. This work can foster a sense of agency and social responsibility while simultaneously supporting skills development and highlighting curriculum relevance. Importantly, these examples are also spaces where youth can develop a shared sense of connection, understanding and empathy for one another (McCarty et al, 2022).

What we learn from examples of community resilience development by service organizations is that they begin by assessing community needs and identifying those that they are best positioned to respond to (Liebenberg & Hutt-MacLeod, 2017). They then build on this by drawing on existing formal and informal networks to address the identified need. Collectively, these networks explore additional resources within or around them that can be integrated into responses. Furthermore, they integrate feedback into this process, ensuring that responses align with needs, are culturally and contextually relevant, and account for the systemic and structural barriers facing communities and the people living there. Intentional use of informal networks can create effective pathways into participation and decision-making for community members who are marginalized (Liebenberg & Sherman, 2021). While seemingly complex, this process is in fact simple: 1. What is the issue? 2. What do we already have in our organization that we can use to start addressing this issue in a community-based way? And 3. Who can we call on in the community to help out with this, who then may, in the process add to our overall capacity.

In creating more inclusive environments using a community resilience framework, and reflecting solidarity theory, we stand to support teachers to engage with those young people who are most disruptive, difficult and harmful. This in turn stands to change their narratives from my teacher knew, and didn't care, did nothing, to my teacher knew, my teacher cared, and my teacher made the difference.

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