

The role of relational resilience in building academic pathways for students: An interdisciplinary case study from Melbourne, Australia.

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III: Beyond Nature vs. Nurture!
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Abstract

This paper examines relational resilience after Jordan (2013) who argues for a move beyond individual responsibility for 'resilience' to examine the relational dynamic processes and interconnections of individuals with their community.

We explore here the experiences of prospective students who fail to meet university entrance scores for entry to traditional teacher education and enrol into a year long alternative Higher Education diploma program at an Australian university that leads to entry into full teacher education qualifications.

Student communities include families, the staff and an innovative group based approach to curriculum and pedagogy.

These students' cases reveal reciprocal capacities to make strategic choices that support agency for academic success as well as the multi-dimensional and contextual processes that are negotiated in context.



Background

The rationale for the systemic studies in resilience, and this paper, has been to inform multifaceted processes and practices in the Higher Education community and to promote curriculum and pedagogical contexts that encourage resilience when this might not ordinarily occur (Goldstein and Brooks, 2012).

The theoretical orientation for the paper is informed by relational-cultural theory (RCT), described and elaborated by Judith Jordan as the 'belief that all psychological growth occurs in relationships' and that resilience resides in the capacity to make connections rather than the individual self (Jordan, 2013, p. 73).

Additionally, we return to the conceptual principles incorporating relational agency.

Resilience is elaborated as a culturally constructed concept we place on this context to make sense of *how we go about our work* (Edwards, 2009, 2010; Edwards and Apostolov, 2007)



Literature

1. Luthar and Cicchetti et al. (2000, p. 554) assert 'resilience' used when referring to a dynamic 'process or phenomenon of competence' which encompasses 'positive adaptation'. Positive adaptation in this teacher education context would include *positive adaption in relation to the course pedagogy and curriculum*
2. Relational agency emphasises the importance of the dynamic in relationships draws on the idea of distributed expertise and an ability to recognise, draw on and contribute to that expertise (Edwards and Apostolov, 2007).
3. Relational cultural theory (RCT) that directs our attention towards the importance of 'growth-fostering relationships'... characterised by *mutual empathy, mutual empowerment to produce a sense of worth, productivity and (increased) clarity* (Jordan, 2013, p.77).

Methodology

The **relational element** of the theory suggest broader cultural accounts of contexts and situations. In this case study the relational capabilities of these students and the institutional, specifically curriculum and pedagogy, of the course are considered in clarifying resilience concepts. In this way this paper attempts to follow Hartling's (2003, p. 4) call to clarify the role of relational practices and cultural conditions that enhance resilience.

Mixed Methods case study with a quantitative study examining traditional resilience factors and focus group interviews with a sample from the 2013 cohort.

Harland (2014) points out that **case studies in Higher Education** is a methodological tool that can be used to support practitioner research. Harland further notes case studies are useful to elaborate from the experiences of others and has 'intrinsically' interesting characteristics (Stake, 1994, p. 237). The intrinsically interesting aspect of the case of The Education Diploma are the institutional and organisational aspects as illustrated through the lens of students in the programme.



Context

Victoria University is one of the few universities in Australia that offer both Higher Education and Vocational Education programmes and this Higher Education diploma resides in a space between these sectors.

The course combined Arts and Education **units and contained embedded academic literacies elements and cross disciplinary teaching.**

The course has additional time, 16 weeks instead of the usual 12 week Australian course semester and other in-built methodologies; regular research meetings, staff collaborations and a community of practice (COP) approach to student engagement (regular staff formal and informal meetings, high level of coordinator engagement with student cohort for example). Carr, A., Gilmore, G., & Cacciattolo, M. (2015).

At the time of this study (2013) the course had been running for two years with high rates of students completing the course and a pathway into second and subsequent teacher education courses with transitions of 62% in 2012, 74% in 2013 and 79% in 2014. Between 40 and 100 students per year into the second year of teacher education courses.

I am the course coordinator (hence practitioner research) interest

Who were the students in this case?

43 students completed all the elements of the quantitative survey (replicating Funston 2011). This was approximately 30% of total possible students in the 2013 cohort (150).

Although this is a limited response rate as James and Krause *et al.* (2010) point out this is reasonably common HE response rate. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 52 years. Most were young adults (M age=21.8, SD =6.9), with nearly half of the sample 18 years of age (41.9%), and a further 48.8% of the sample aged between 19-30.

Nine (9) self-selected students completed focus group interviews towards the end of their first semester.

Quantitative data – preliminary analysis

Resilience and Academic Outcomes

The single item resilience question was as follows: “Resilience is sometime defined as ‘the ability to recover readily from or resist being affected by a setback, illness, etc’ (The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary). Are you the sort of person who bounces back? How would you describe yourself?’ Participants were able to select

1. Very resilient
2. Quite resilient
3. Not especially resilient
4. Not resilient
5. I cannot answer this

Two participants indicated they could not answer, and their responses were removed. Four additional participants did not answer the item. Most participants ranked themselves as quite resilient (64.1%) or very resilient (15.4%), with only a small percentage ranking themselves as not especially resilient (12.8%) or not resilient (2.6%).

Table x

Many participants did not perceive themselves to possess important academic skills. The most highly endorsed skill was being a good listener, and the least endorsed was reading and extracting information efficiently (see Table X). When tallied, many participants only felt they possessed one of the available skills ($n=8$, 21.1%), with a fairly even spread in the distribution up to the maximum score and a mean of 3.95 ($SD=1.95$).

Table X

Self-perceived academic skills in order of highest endorsement against the self reported resilience definition

Skill item	Number of participants endorsed
I'm a good listener	28 (71.8%)
I can use computers for doing research and assignments	24 (61.5%)
I can generally build appropriate relationships/connections and work collaboratively	22 (56.4%)
I can manage my time	20 (51.3%)
I know when and how to ask for help	20 (51.3%)
I can speak with confidence in a group	17 (43.6%)
I can read and extract information efficiently	15 (38.5%)
I can consider and make sense of complex ideas or arguments	11 (28.2%)

Significant relationships were not apparent between resilience and age, hours in paid or unpaid work, ATAR score ($n=14$), and all assessment items as well as the final grade.

The focus group interviews

The focus group interviews below represent conversations with nine Higher Education Diploma students in the 2013 cohort. The students reveals capacities to make strategic choices that support agency for academic success as well as the multi- dimensional and contextual processes that are negotiated in context.

We use the Comstock and Hammer *et al.*, (2008, p. 280) framework for clarifying how the students focus group discuss the pedagogical and curriculum related elements of the course that bridge the rich relational cultural context to support relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies. These are

- ❖ Enhanced relational authenticity (mutual empathy, mutual empowerment)
- ❖ Strengthening confidence
- ❖ Connections through peer groups and the community (including teachers, parents and other colleagues)
- ❖ Desire for more connection

Enhancing relational authenticity (mutual empathy, mutual empowerment)

The first focus group topic of conversation related to the positive elements of their school experience (one day linked to their Higher Education unit) which for these students had been completed the previous week? The question was framed in general terms “What has been your most positive experience on the course so far” and the discussion immediately went to the school classroom placement experience(s).

- ❖ ‘Going to the classroom and getting that little bit of experience and you need to have a couple of them so that you feel more confident as you go’ one student noted.
- ❖ Another stated ‘I think it could have been longer and maybe a whole day instead of two hours’. The placement experience clearly conveyed a sense of mutual empowerment and engagement between and amongst them and with their tutors.

Strengthening confidence

Students reflected that having the same teacher developed their 'social interactions' and hence their confidence. For the students in the focus group this was particularly the case with maths.

- ❖ *The '(tutor) does not just sit there and put the method on the board he will make it fun otherwise you lose concentration' and*
- ❖ *'after the first week or two if you asked for help he showed you a simple way of doing the maths and instead of people over-thinking it he gave you more confidence that anything you put on the board you could complete it'. This was somewhat surprising given maths is traditionally difficult topic to engage students to develop confidence.*

Connections through peer groups and the community

The course allocates students into groups from their orientation and enrolment phase (rather than allow student to enrol on an individualistic basis) student connections are co-constructed by the course coordinators.

- ❖ Students reflected *'being put in groups with people that you would not necessarily talk to in your classes and being forced to interact with them gives you the sort of skills that you need to teach and you do need to interact with everyone'* and *'getting put into groups with people you would not even talk to and getting to know them and making friends with them'*.
- ❖ One student specifically linked a future role as a teacher with the way the course group structure and pedagogies *'being able to talk socially trying to make sure everyone in the group feels welcome so if someone isn't talking having a chat with them so they have confidence to chat to others so this is good teaching'*.

Desire for more connection

Students further specifically linked future teaching roles with the course curriculum (including teaching placement) and pedagogical approaches with both their responsibilities as citizens and as future teachers.

- ❖ *An example 'accepting difference and embracing that this is a good thing.. because everyone in the course is different and just like students you will teach they are difference and diversity should be embraced'.*
- ❖ *Another student reflected 'preparation is important so we have to prepare for assignments as a teacher, you have to prepare teaching plans and sometimes we have to think about how to communicate to kids so preparation is the key'.*



Discussion

These students' cases reveal capacities to make strategic choices that support agency for academic success as well as the multi-dimensional and contextual processes that are negotiated in context.

The quantitative data reveals little significance between these student 'measures' of resilience and student capacity to engage in the course (academically or otherwise).

The case study draws attention to higher education factors that encouraged students' capacities and capabilities to interconnect with day today opportunities and challenges that university life brings.

The Arts and Education staff in this Higher Education Diploma course sought to 'find ways to enable non-traditional students to draw on the rich cultural resources, alternative knowledge and ways of knowing that brought them to the course' (Hallpike, 2014, p. 107).

Findings highlight how a university institution, constructed pedagogy and curriculum can enhance relational resilience for learners who come from diverse backgrounds.

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