'Steeling' Young People: Resilience and Youth Policy in Scotland

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This article examines the growth of resilience-focused youth policy in Scotland, and its association with the proliferation of the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) agenda. To do this, it critically compares policy discourse with qualitative data on young people's experiences of growing up in two similar, low-income neighbourhoods. This combination leads us to problematise resilience-informed practice, relative to the voices of young people. Our review demonstrates that by emphasising individual protective factors, resilience discourse reframes inequalities embedded within certain neighbourhoods, and the specific impacts on young people who live there. The consequence is not an assets-based youth policy that supports all young people, but rather a form of resilience which promotes the 'steeling' of young people; making them stronger and more resistant to adversities. These adversities, we conclude, may be preventable within a more just social order.

Keywords: Adverse childhood experiences, resilience, young people, poverty, Scotland.

Introduction

This article explores the growth of resilience-focused youth policy in Scotland, and its association with the Scottish ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) movement. Resilience has had a mounting influence in recent years, both conceptually and empirically (Daniel and Wassell, 2002; Scottish Government, 2012, 2017). The launch of the National Practice Model, *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) in 2008 aimed to mainstream resilience-led practice within children and families services, with the objective of improving the well-being and outcomes of children and young people (Scottish Government, 2008a). 'Resilience', according to the model, consists of three 'building blocks': a secure base, self-esteem and self-efficacy. If possessed, these allow a young person to 'do well' despite adversity (Scottish Government, 2012: 22). Since the introduction of GIRFEC, resilience has notably been incorporated into wider youth policy, extolled as a capacity which can help young people manage adversity in the 'here and now', and prevent them from becoming the 'poor of tomorrow' (Scottish Government, 2018a). The emergent ACE agenda has sought to evidence this, by suggesting that facing, and overcoming, adversity can 'buffer' future developmental disruption and build pro-social skills (Couper and Mackie, 2016: 15).

Our own empirical research, which prioritises the accounts of young people growing up in two low-income neighbourhoods in Scotland, is at odds with this conceptualisation

of resilience. Rather, we argue that the 'Scottish approach' over-emphasises individual assets and actions, shifting attention away from the structural determinants of health, education and well-being inequalities across the life course. Policies to increase resilience to the health effects of unemployment are no substitute for more jobs; nor is increasing resilience to the life-long effects of child poverty a substitute for good family support.

We begin our discussion with a brief conceptual overview of resilience, before moving on to consider how these ideas are reflected first in Scottish policy and the emergent ACEs agenda, and second in the subjective experiences of young people. We conclude by arguing that the strategic dependence on resilience theory in Scotland deserves reconsideration and reframing.

Resilience and individualisation

Young people in contemporary society are increasingly considered active in constructing their own life chances. Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (1997: 109) conclude that this emphasis on 'choice' and 'opportunity' has created a widespread belief that collective problems should be resolved through individual action, while individuals – not social structures – are held to account for failure. The resilience agenda has been widely criticised for its association to this neo-liberal ideology (Joseph, 2013), with Michael Ungar (2005) asserting that, at its worst, the theory of resilience has been appropriated by neo-conservatives. In this context, resilience is akin to a process of 'steeling', whereby individuals overcome challenging experiences that strengthen their capacity to withstand subsequent adversity (Small and Memmo, 2004). This places the onus on individuals to 'bounce back', regardless of circumstances, while simultaneously shifting responsibility for dealing with crisis away from the public sphere (Harrison, 2012: 97).

Evidence of a young person's positive adaptation to adversity has typically focused on 'success' or 'competence', primarily in education or pro-social activities, such as staying in education, gaining good results and participating in clubs, associations and 'useful' tasks (Mahoney, 2000; Gilligan, 2006). However, ambiguity remains as to how these findings should be understood, with limited reliable empirical evidence on how resilience functions, what its predictors are, and how it can be reliably measured (Shean, 2015).

Constructivist approaches to resilience go some way to shifting the individual risk-based model, to one with greater emphasis on social and cultural environment (Ungar, 2015). Yet even with this adjustment, it is contended that largely middle class social values continue to frame ideas of what a resilient response or outcome 'should' look like (Davidson, 2008: 115). The framework also gives no affordance to what it means should a young person not achieve the proscribed characteristics, capabilities and behaviour considered resilient. Together, these challenges raise concerns over how conceptual knowledge of resilience is understood, and, in turn, how this knowledge is translated into practice settings.

Putting 'resilience' to forefront of youth policy in Scotland

Resilience is not a new policy concept in Scotland (Daniel and Wassell, 2002; Newman and Blackburn, 2002); however, it was with the 2008 launch of GIRFEC that it became mainstreamed. GIRFEC's aim was to implement a practice model which ensured that all children and young people had the right help, at the right time, provided through an integrated and consistent network of support (Scottish Government, 2012).

It conceptualises a social world where the child or young person is at the centre, with support networks 'layered' around them. Articulated as a 'whole child approach', this ecological model (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977) is used to recognise first the impact that the wider environment can have on an individual, and second, the ways in which different parts of this environment can interact.

One of the most notable shifts prompted by this 'whole child approach' was the emphasis placed on the ambiguous notion of well-being, rather than welfare alone (Stoddart, 2015: 103). It is relative to well-being that resilience becomes fundamental; first as an 'innate' individual characteristic; second, as a tool for practice; and third, as a desired outcome. Thus, children and young people might be described as possessing (or in need of) prescribed resilient characteristics that signify well-being, such as self-esteem, self-efficiency or good attachment. Interventions can then be used to both measure resilience within individuals, and support its development. Finally, by providing the right support, at the right time, young people gain the capacity to find their own solutions to problems as they arise – in other words, they become empowered to create their own well-being through resilience and the ability to 'bounce back' from adversity.

This exemplifies the 'Scottish approach', a political strategy focused on building the strengths and assets of individuals and communities, rather than perceived deficits (Cairney et al., 2016: 339). Such an approach recognises local people's abilities to contribute to change by fostering community-led solutions and minimising professional intervention (Dolan, 2006). This is to be supported, provided children and young people are included as active collaborators. However, there are tensions between strategies that seek to build assets to address inequity, and those squarely focused on the removal of structural barriers. The former may support the claim that social exclusion is shaped by individual actions and choices (France, 2008). This is reflected in the 'naïvely egocentric' GIRFEC model, which presents a view of society in which social structures and processes are externalised from the self (Elias, 1978: 14–15). Eric Stoddart (2015: 107), meanwhile, has problematised the aspirational, and largely unachievable, thresholds set by GIRFEC. Failure to meet these thresholds can, he contends, result in a young person inaccurately being judged as having inadequate or inappropriate well-being or resilience. This focus on the self-actualising, autonomous individual, Stoddart (2015) claims, comes at the expense of a more relational framing of these qualities.

Resilience and the ACE-aware movement

While GIRFEC introduced the possibility of a more inclusive, rights-based approach to youth policy, the incorporation of the ACE agenda has prompted a troubling reinterpretation of structural inequality. The resilient individual envisioned by GIRFEC as overcoming inequality has become progressively engrained in Scottish policy, driven by the recent campaign to make Scotland 'an ACE-aware nation'. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), as discussed elsewhere in this themed section, are described as stressful events occurring in childhood that can result in excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain, and consequently diminished health and well-being across the life course and generations (Felitti et al., 1998; Burke-Harris, 2014). The impact of the ACE study (Felitti et al., 1998), and the many papers generated, has supported a compelling case for a public health movement ascribing social problems to an individual's biology, brain development and even genetic variants. This movement

has gained momentum internationally, rapidly being popularised through resilience and trauma-informed policy projects for children, young people and adults.

We would argue that a similar projectisation of resilience is underway in Scotland, with the response to, and prevention of, ACEs being given a critical role in tackling the attainment gap. The Programme for Government, *A Nation with Ambition* (Scottish Government, 2017), states that, looking forward, GIRFEC will focus effort on preventing ACEs and on addressing their negative impact on children and young people. Consequently, a ministerial event on ACEs was held in March 2018, with additional activities including the establishment of a Scottish ACEs Hub based within NHS Health Scotland and appointment of a full-time Scottish Government post to lead the ACE agenda.

It is only in the last few years that this policy project has become popularised, largely as a consequence of the national tour of the documentary, *Resilience*[1]. Since 2017, it has been shown in communities across Scotland, with screenings supported by, amongst others, third sector organisations, local communities and schools. An associated campaign, *ACE-Aware Scotland*, is now taking forward a vision to start a cultural revolution by making Scotland the first ACE-aware nation. This high profile campaign has been framed as a grassroots initiative, consistently stressing the 'public hunger' for ACE-awareness, and the need for others to follow this stance. Rhetoric within this vision focuses on the importance of hope, compassion, love and belonging as means of building resilience, although there is little specificity over what makes a nation 'ACE-aware', or of the impact this will deliver (Zeedyk, 2018; see also The Vision, 2018). Moreover, unlike sociological approaches to relationships, great weight is placed on the 'science of biology', with resilience being claimed as a means of preventing, or mitigating, negative effects on the architecture of the developing brain caused by ACEs (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012). Unlike the subjectivity embodied in GIRFEC, tick box typologies typified by the ACE-score card provide a narrow, decontextualised focus on adversity, giving no account to the complexity of the coping response. One claim being made is that in better understanding and responding to a young person's social and emotional needs, individuals will become more resilient, self-assured and capable of dealing with adversity. However, the projectisation of resilience in this context relies on interventions designed to 'build' resilience which identify 'at risk' individuals, and a reciprocal normative change in behaviour. It also, arguably, relies on moral entrepreneurs using the strength of their position to encourage others to follow their moral stance, and the rules and values stemming from it (see Becker, 1995).

Relational practices are of course important, and we have argued for greater relational practices in our previous work (see Davidson and Whittaker, 2017). But they are neither new nor revolutionary (Folgheraiter, 2007). More significantly, the individualising rhetoric of the ACEs campaign gives little acknowledgement of the everyday social inequalities in Scottish society, nor the fact that since 2014 income inequality, poverty and child poverty have all increased (Scottish Government, 2018b). Scottish Government policy, meanwhile, is attempting to square this circle, by recognising both the need to tackle structural injustice (see Scottish Government, 2008b, 2008c; Independent Advisor on Poverty and Inequality, 2016) and the role of individual resilience within this. The *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018–22* expresses this most clearly by placing income poverty as central to the majority of its actions. Resilience, meanwhile, is cited as having a role in supporting children living in poverty now, by preventing them from becoming adults with children in poverty. This will be done by helping children and families participate in their communities and better manage the impacts of poverty (Scottish Government, 2018a: 16).

The recent Ministerial Event on ACEs, meanwhile, made a clearer statement noting that 'The significance of child poverty and inequalities need to be incorporated into any approaches to prevent and address ACEs'. It continues by stating that '[t]he impact of poverty as a major stressor needs to be understood and addressed, but without stigmatising "deprived areas"' (Scottish Government, 2018c: 13).

It is significant, then, that *Shifting the Curve* (Independent Advisor on Poverty and Inequality, 2016), and subsequent reports by the Independent Advisor on Poverty and Inequality, make no reference to ACEs, and only one to resilience. Rather the reports, commissioned by the First Minister of Scotland, state that material and structural disadvantage are the principal elements shaping young people's life chances. Critically, they also address the lived experience of people in poverty, and the role that place and socio-economic status have in defining ones' choices, chances and opportunities.

It seems opportune, at this point, to turn to our own empirical data on young people's lived experiences of poverty. Our discussion is brief (more detailed findings from the research can be found at Davidson, 2013, 2017 and Carlin, 2017), focusing specifically on how their experiences correspond to policy discourse on resilience.

Everyday experiences of poverty and resilience

We are in agreement with Davidson (2008: 115), who proposes that by examining socio-cultural and environmental contexts we can avoid imposing normative values, and gain insight into how resilience is enacted in lives lived. Here we draw on two qualitative research projects from very similar socio-cultural and environmental contexts; both explored the everyday experiences of young people growing up in urban Scotland. Emma Davidson's (2013) research foci was on how young people define and give meaning to 'antisocial behaviour' in an estate called Robbiestoun, and involved fourteen months ethnographic fieldwork in a traditional youth club and detached youth work project. This article draws on data from a group of ten young people, described by professionals as the neighbourhood's 'hardest-to-reach', and arguably those facing the greatest levels of adversity at home, at school, and in their local neighbour. Eric Carlin's (2017) study, based in Pilton, sought to examine young people's transition to adulthood, and specifically explored the utility of 'resilience' in this context. The fieldwork included participant observation in a local youth centre, alongside in-depth interviews with twenty-six young people.

Whilst the substantive themes of the two projects were distinct, the data from these studies merit consideration together since they provide a unique opportunity to contextualise young people's interactions with resilience with respect to their socio-economic circumstances. The data sets were not formally brought together, but our existing analysis was discussed extensively. This resulted in several themes being extracted, and subjected to comparison. Direct quotes have been used to illustrate key themes, and these retain the Scottish vernacular throughout. A brief glossary is provided in the Notes section[2].

Robbiestoun and Pilton: Adversity in everyday life

As noted above, Robbiestoun and Pilton were similar in context, both being suburban housing estates with high levels of social housing. Both had suffered long-term socio-economic disadvantage, and exhibited crime rates, unemployment and income deprivation significantly above the city and national average. Despite efforts at physical renewal,

entrenched 'territorial stigma' was fastened on the areas (Wacquant, 1999: 1644). This was reported by young people as a familiar, yet influential, discourse from outsiders which broadcast pervasive images of Robbiestoun and Pilton as 'problem' places.

Young people's narratives on stigma had a persistent connection with the everyday realities of poverty and inequality. In both datasets the young people made mention of their own and their families' material disadvantage, with references to struggling with very little money, and the consequences of this within their families. There was also a strong awareness that those around them were having the same experiences and that they were all 'in it together':

> *Many people round here dinnae have electricity, dinnae have food, nothing for Christmas or whatever. No holidays, cars or nothing like that (Jon, eighteen, Robbiestoun)*

Adversity was reported across both studies, and across different aspects of young people's lives. This included experiences of bereavement, parental incarceration, alcohol and drug use, poor physical and mental health, and involvement in street and home-based violence. There were also common experiences of adversity within communities, including poor housing conditions, not feeling safe, disengagement with school and education, unemployment, as well as stigma and social marginalisation.

What is striking is not how prevalent these experiences were, but the deep relationship between reported experiences of adversity and structural disadvantage. This is present throughout both projects with respect to young people's relationship to education and the labour market. Disjointed experiences of school, including suspensions, shortened timetables and exclusions, were very common, with several describing being 'given' a troublesome identity from an early age and 'written off' by the education system:

> *Ah used tae get excluded and everything as well. Like, ah goat, like, not, ah wis meant tae be properly a Christmas leaver because my birthday was in September but they said they didnae want me back. So ah left and ma last exam, they just told me tae leave. Cos they didn't want me . . . like, ye get some of them that are just, they think they're better than you and you're always dae wrong and - ah could go on all day about that school but who cares? (John, sixteen, Pilton)*

At the time of interviews, none of the Robbiestoun young people, or any in Pilton, had secure employment with a permanent contract. The Pilton research looked more deeply at the structural processes impacting on a young person's transition from school to employment and found no convincing evidence that young people were not committed to work, or encouraged and supported by their families to find work. Reflecting research elsewhere (Finlay *et al.*, 2010: Shildrick *et al.*, 2012), structural barriers – including inadequately resourced training and apprenticeships, as well as a labour market characterised by part-time and casualised jobs – were key to preventing young people from successfully entering the labour market.

With respect to young people's sense of purpose and futures, there was no 'poverty of aspiration'; young people from both areas articulated clear hopes. What limited them was their experience of inequality, and the availability of quality resources and opportunities to help them succeed. Young people found diverse strategies to ameliorate everyday experiences of exclusion and marginalisation. In some cases, this resulted in the formation of tight, intense friendships with others in the area. Involvement in crime and antisocial

behaviour, in turn, provided a source of status, power and positioning which was absent from other domains of their lives. The bonded social capital cultivated may offer benefit in the here and now, but its value was spatially and temporally confined. Skill and knowledge about fighting, for example, had little value in the context of education or employment. Bonded social capital was also destructive in that it served, in the long term, to limit the opportunities for overcoming disadvantage.

We concur with Ian Finlay *et al.* (2010: 865) who conclude that socially and economically disengaged young people have 'normal aspirations, but sometimes low expectations'. Such expectations are based on their own lived experiences of teachers, of school, the police and other professionals intervening in their lives, as well as the wider labour market and popular (negative) discourse about their neighbourhood. Based on a psychosocial model of resilience, these strategies would likely be described as a lack of resilience. However, given the material disadvantage and social marginalisation young people articulated, it is more logical to consider it a functional response to the social and economic context: 'a sensible strategy because it implies knowing when to stop trying to achieve a goal that is unattainable' (Julkunen, 2001: 270). This is what Tom, a youth worker from Pilton, meant when he defined resilience as anticipating inevitable 'failure'. This is echoed by Patsy in her refusal to think about her future:

> I dunno what I wannae dae. I just dinnae wanna plan it. I feel like if I plan it, it'll go wrong (Patsy, eighteen, Pilton).

Overall, these responses might be considered as a justification for an asset based model of resilience. Interventions are required which will cultivate and re-direct young people's energies, enabling them to have greater confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. These characteristics, in turn, will enable them to make the 'right' choices, and take the 'right' opportunities that will lead to success.

This perspective fails to see the possibility of these behaviours being a functional response to inequity in structures and social processes, primarily about 'getting by', in a context of few resources, little control and limited opportunities. A lack of resources does not, as Shildrick *et al.* (2009: 458) point out, 'prevent active and reflexive choice and decision-making but it surely serves to limit the options for such, in some cases severely'. The 'reflexive project of self' (Giddens, 1991) is a possibility, but social divisions, and in particular class, continue to influence and shape young people's futures. Unmistakeably absent from young people's accounts is the notion of resilience as a dual process. Michael Ungar (2012) describes this as the individual pushing out, while 'the world' is reciprocating with opportunities. In Robbiestoun and Pilton, there was no such dynamic interaction between person and context, simply because young people had discovered that in many domains of their life there was nothing substantive to 'push' out onto.

Concluding thoughts

We use this final section to bring together, as best we can, the strands of this debate. We acknowledge that more research is required to gain a full understanding of how resilience is being practised in an 'ACE-aware' Scotland, and indeed, what being an 'ACE-aware nation'

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actually entails. Here, we focus our conclusions on what an intensified, asset-based approach to resilience will mean for young people like those in Robbiestoun and Pilton.

GIRFEC has undoubtedly brought a positive change to the ethos of children's services in Scotland. It has placed children and the family 'at the centre' of decision making, while at the same time stressing the importance of understanding children's lives in context. A further encouraging shift has been the promotion of co-ordinated, universal services which respond to children and young people's well-being and welfare. The model, nonetheless, retains an unhelpful focus on the individual and their assets as being the key to overcoming, and addressing, adversity. The incorporation of GIRFEC into the ACE-agenda raises concerns that even greater attention will be given to individual-level protective factors, ignoring broader structural determinants.

This same focus, we suggest, may also lead to a de-prioritisation of youth policy. The ACE-agenda, supported by scientific claims relating to toxic stress and the architecture of the brain, places much of its emphasis on the early years, with the first three years being the most critical. We would argue that Scottish policy is less coherent in considering needs and potential interventions to support transitions from youth to adulthood, and that this is an area requiring to be addressed.

Equally critical is the absence of young people's active participation in the emerging ACE-agenda, and in particular, what it means in the context of poverty. Our accounts from young people reveal that social and economic context does not simply require acknowledgement; but rather it must be central to our attempts to understanding young people's experiences of adversity. In both studies, the young people's behaviours matched official definitions of resilience: they were helping and supporting each other; individually and collectively adapting to adversarial conditions; and exhibiting skills, attributes, and abilities that enable them to navigate hardships, difficulties and challenges. One might even argue that they were actively transforming the adversities facing them by re-appropriating them as sites of learning, strength and positive characteristics. However, it is unlikely that their behaviours would be assessed as a positive, successful or competent adaptation to adversity. Indeed, young people found themselves being labelled variously as 'antisocial', 'deviant', 'maladjusted' or 'too late to help'.

Resilience expressed in this context is not changing, or transforming, fundamental inequalities that have served to marginalise these young people's housing, income, or future employment opportunities. Instead, it is obscuring the material determinants of inequalities, and potentially penalising individuals who are most in need by making them responsible not only for their own well-being, but that of the nation. It is also ignoring the real achievements of many disadvantaged young people, who fail to achieve normative expressions of 'success'. At odds with this, our studies lead us to conclude that investment in exploring the lived experiences of young people in challenging contexts, linked with a commitment to policies that change circumstances rather than individuals, has potential to shift the focus away from resilience to supporting young people to manage their lives within thriving and less stigmatised communities.

Notes

1 The documentary 'Resilience' is supportive of the ACE movement and what is described as the "insidious effects" of toxic stress. Branded in a revelatory and evangelic style, 'Resilience' can be purchased

by individuals and groups for screening (https://kpjrfilms.co/resilience/). See also https://www.youtube .com/watch?v=BOH7t2IKKrk for details of Scottish screenings.

2   Glossary:

Ah = I
Dae = do
Didnae = did not
Dinnae = do not
Goat = got
Tae = to
Wannae = want to
Wis = was
Ye = you

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