Working Collaboratively to Build Resilience: A CHAT Approach

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Evidence from two studies of social exclusion based in England are drawn on to suggest that responsible agency can be seen as a feature of resilience. I argue that this agency, or capacity to act effectively in the world, is developed relationally and is evident in people's thoughtful actions in their worlds, but is also contingent on the affordances for such action in any environment. That is, resilience can be seen as responsible engagement with one's world as well as a capacity to withstand difficulties. The theoretical basis of this argument is Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) which proposes that we are shaped by but also shape our worlds. The implications for professional practices are discussed.

Introduction: the two studies

The two research studies that are drawn on in this article were both located within a government-led approach to tackling social exclusion, reflecting a decade or so of analyses of social exclusion and its implications (e.g. OECD, 1995). Policies began to emphasise early intervention at the first signs of vulnerability; more flexibility on the part of service providers; and increased co-ordination of local provision in order to address the complex needs of vulnerable children and young people.

The Children's Fund was one strand in these policies, which saw social exclusion as detachment from networks that bind children and young people into socially beneficial systems, such as the take up of education and health care. The cumulative nature of trajectories of exclusion suggested that collaborative working that cuts across professional boundaries helps with both recognising the impact of accumulated vulnerability and how it might be tackled.

The two studies: the government-funded National Evaluation of the Children's Fund (NECF) and the ESRC funded Learning in and for Interagency Working project (LIW) have both examined interagency collaborations aimed at early interventions with vulnerable children and young people. NECF evaluated the Children's Fund between January 2003 and March 2006. The Fund was initiated in England in 2000 and is expected to continue to 2008. It is a programme of targeted interventions, aiming at disrupting trajectories of social exclusion, which was put in place in all 150 local authorities in England and is managed through 149 Children's Fund partnerships, which commission services focusing on building the resilience of children and young people. It aims at achieving prevention through partnership working and participation, which is seen as enabling service users to engage in service development. It is quite firmly located in what France and Utting (2005) call the 'Risk and Protection Paradigm' of prevention. Here I draw on just one aspect of the evaluation: the examination, in 16 case studies, of structures and processes of partnership working and service delivery as they impact on the life experiences of children and young people (Edwards *et al.*, 2006).

LIW[1] is a four-year research study due to end in December 2007. It is examining how professionals learn to work collaboratively to prevent the social exclusion of young people. It focuses on how professionals interpret the demands of multi-professional collaborations and learn to work across professional boundaries. We are working in depth in five local authorities and looking at *inter alia* services clustered around a school; a new neighbourhood multi-professional team and an established youth offending team that is needing to work with others in a more responsive way.

Both studies draw on cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) frameworks, which locate individual learning and development in environmental affordances for thinking and acting (Cole, 1996). They also, importantly for an examination of resilience, see development as a process of being shaped by and shaping our worlds. That is, we act on our worlds using the conceptual and material artefacts available to us, but we also shape the world by our actions on it. This account of development requires us to look at the impact of learners on their worlds, as well as what is happening to their development as a result of being in the world.

There are two consequences for a study of resilience. One, as we shall see, points us towards seeing resilience as a capacity to contribute as well as to use resources in settings. The second is that CHAT requires us to think about the development of resilience simultaneously at the individual and systemic levels. As we change our interpretations and responses, so do the systems we inhabit.

Resilience

Resilience is a contested concept in the literature on prevention (Little, Ashford and Morpeth, 2004). Emerging from studies of vulnerable children, where it became evident that even in the most adverse circumstances around 50 per cent of children do not succumb to the risks that surround their development (Rutter, 1985, 1987), the concept enables interventions to work with the strengths that children and their families bring to developmental pathways. It therefore focuses on the strengths that prevent a vulnerability to adversity (Masten and Garmezy, 1985; Garmezy, 1991) and can be seen as the development of competences that enable children and young people to deal with challenges in their lives (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998). Resilience here is a capacity for adaptation along appropriate developmental pathways, despite disruptions such as family breakdown, and its best predictors are relationships with 'caring prosocial adults' and 'good intellectual functioning'. The origins of resilience in potentially vulnerable children is therefore similar to the development of competence in children in stable and nurturing situations.

Masten and Coatsworth ultimately offer a relatively complex account of resilience,, which includes analyses of the contexts in which competences are developed and exercised. However, they operate with an interactionist and arguably normative, framework of individual development which retains a separation of individual and context, rather than the more iterative account of CHAT understandings of development. Also, despite the attention paid to context by Masten and her colleagues, their emphasis on individual competence is attractive to those planning interventions. This is understandable. France and Utting (2005), for example, note how the idea of resilience building may have the potential to help policy makers identify actions that might be taken to enhance development. The Children's Fund focus on commissioning delivering activities, such as after school clubs or mentoring schemes, illustrates such an approach.

Interventions therefore tend not to be based on analyses of contexts as well as individual strengths. Particularly, they rarely recognise the interplay between context and individual, central to even interactionist accounts of development, and therefore rarely involve action on contexts to make it easier for vulnerable children to engage with them. In the Children's Fund, we saw relatively few examples of a multi-layered approach to social exclusion, which included action on contexts that excluded. Instead, we found mainly single service interventions, such as activities to develop parenting skills, self-esteem programmes and after school activities.

There are some weaknesses in moving from evidence of what is likely to lead to resilience, to building resilience by focusing instrumentally on specific competences. Here I shall tackle only two possible weaknesses and suggest that a CHAT informed view of resilience may be helpful. Firstly, a focus on the development of competences that enable coping can lead to a view of trajectories of inclusion which emphasise the individual as user and consumer of social goods rather than as someone who might also contribute to those goods. Secondly, by emphasising individual competences, attention can be diverted from the contextual affordances and how they might be worked on. I shall examine both of these points in more detail.

Individual trajectories of social inclusion

Methodologically the notion of a trajectory is compelling. It allows researchers to examine development over time and place and reveals the interactions that have shaped individuals' movements through the social worlds they inhabit. It identifies where struggles occur as people move across social contexts and attempt to bring order to their own conduct in different sets of practices. When studying moves away from exclusion, these movements across contexts and the success or otherwise of attempts at bringing order to the responses that are made to new settings are sites where resilience can be revealed.

The idea of a trajectory is almost pervasive in the literature on resilience, prevention and social exclusion (Edwards *et al.*, 2002; Place *et al.*, 2002; Edwards and Mackenzie, 2005). It is also in line with current English education policy on personalisation and choice (DEMOS-Hay, 2004; DfES, 2004; Leadbeater, 2004). But it is not unproblematic.

I take it as given that life trajectories are embedded in and shaped by relationships with others. Consequently, we may be more or less resilient in different situations and so position ourselves differently in relation to how we access and contribute to the resources of settings. I also recognise that trajectories are not unidirectional, but can, and indeed need to, be recursive (see Edwards and Mackenzie, 2005, for an overview of both points). My concern, therefore, is not that a trajectory presupposes some simplistic sense of linear and uniform progress. I don't think it does.

The problem arises when trajectories are associated only with choice and not with choice plus responsibility. The following extract from a recent report on extended schools, i.e. schools that form the hub of educational and social care provision in a neighbourhood, illustrates the point.

> At Our Lady, Star of the Sea, pupils discuss during their breakfast club the choices they have made for that day. There is much haggling between friends over what they should do at lunch-time and after school. As a result, the young pupils seem to have become quite astute consumers, increasingly taking responsibility for managing their own time. (DEMOS-Hay, 2004: 19)

Here, as well as reiterating the CHAT view that we impact on the social practices in which we engage, I am returning to a concept I have worked with over the years in relation to professional practice in complex settings: responsible agency (Edwards, Gilroy and Hartley, 2002). Its origins lie in the work of Charles Taylor. Teasing out what being a person as opposed to an animal actually means, Taylor talks of our capacity to respond to what is significant to us in events and a sensitivity to certain goals and standards (Taylor, 1985). So far this remains an argument for emphasising the individual. But later, worrying about the individualising propensities of late modernity, he tackles what he sees as a dangerous form of 'self-fashioning'. He particularly argues for our need to connect to systems of common values and commit to socially oriented goals that are constructed within and shared by the communities in which we participate (Taylor, 1991).

Taylor's agency is therefore a responsible one, with a contestable commutarian good at its core. In recent policy discussions we have seen the trajectories of inclusion inhabited by children and young people associated primarily with choice (DEMOS-Hay, 2004; DfES, 2004) rather than responsibility in the Taylor sense. These policies may well sustain a view of vulnerable person as service user and services as commodities to be used to enhance the forward movement of a trajectory. They also underplay the powerful effect of participation in shaping services on building the self-efficacy of children and young people (Edwards *et al.*, 2006).

An emphasis on consumer choice also diverts attention from the detail of how individual trajectories are developed and managed, so that resilience experienced in one setting can transfer to another site. Dreier, working with the trajectories of patients in psychotherapy as they move across everyday settings, argues that clients not therapists are the primary agents of therapy (Dreier, 2000) and he reminds us to focus on the micro-level actions, which sustain everyday practices as people move across settings. His research examines the way that patients order and configure their everyday practices so that they manage to function well in different contexts. Here the idea of trajectories starts to connect with discussions of how contexts are configured to engage with them, which will be discussed in the next section.

In my own work, within a CHAT framework, I have examined the detail of relational and responsible aspects of the ordering and configuring of practices in both professional practice and in developing personal resilience. In brief, I have argued that the development of agency through joint action with others at the micro level involves both learning how to access the interpretations and support of others and importantly how to offer interpretations and support to others (Edwards and Mackenzie, 2005; Edwards, 2006). The others, for practitioners involved in disrupting trajectories of exclusion, are likely to be other practitioners, the vulnerable children and the children's other social networks, particularly their families.

I suggest that that a capacity to align oneself with others, to work to a common purpose (e.g. shaping a child's trajectory), is so valuable that it needs to be taught and be reinforced in the social practices of professional activity and also needs to be encouraged in the children and young people who inhabit the trajectories. The reciprocity captured in this suggestion is echoed in those parts of the social capital literature that emphasise the relational aspects of such capital (see Field, 2002, for an overview). It also returns us to the need to enhance developmental accounts of trajectories of inclusion with CHAT so that we can acknowledge the extent to which we both use and transform the resources we find around us.

The CHAT approach is based on the ideas of Vygotsky, and developed in the work of, *inter alia*, Leont'ev and Engeström (Leont'ev, 1978; Rieber and Wollock, 1997; Engeström, 1999). By arguing that the ways we think and act in our worlds are shaped by the cultures in which we are formed and in turn we shape those cultures by our actions, the tradition emphasises the incorporation of the collective into the individual.

This view of development highlights the importance of a multi-layered approach to resilience, which provides some consistency across settings. Trajectories marked by resilient behaviour are developed in responsive relationships with others and are most easily managed when the social practices one encounters in different settings have much in common (Edwards *et al.*, 2002). Consequently, it may be necessary to set up places and activities where children and young people feel safe and can develop new ways of interacting with responsive and caring adults. But it is not a sufficient response, if they are to leave those safe places when they reach 14, to walk streets which they feel are threatening and to live in poverty with their families. It follows that efforts at enhancing resilience at an individual level need to be accompanied by parallel attempts at configuring social practices of support across settings.

The arguments for multi-agency working for enhancing resilience are therefore strong. I shall rehearse just two of them here. Firstly, from the point of view of an individual trajectory, practitioners who are able to share understandings of how resilience may be built, and have knowledge of the experiences and expectations of vulnerable children, are better placed to work responsively with children and young people as they move across settings. A propensity for collaboration reduces the demands on children and young people to adjust their behaviours to different environments and helps them to operate competently in different contexts. As one user of Children's Fund services put it.

> If all the groups are sort of talking to each other and knowing what each other does then if someone goes to one of the groups and they say 'but this is what is going on in my life' and then they identify the support needs and then they'll say 'well we can do this part of it, but that project will deal with that part better, this is our specialism, that's theirs' That's really going to help users. (Mother, talking to NECF)

Secondly, the need for consistency also reinforces the importance of parallel work with schools, families and communities. The importance of leveraging or creating new ways of being, engaging and contributing within communities and families, alongside a focus on trajectories of inclusion is of course well understood (Maton, 2000). The same is true of working with local capabilities to enrich local communities (Sen, 1999; Ranson, 2000). Indeed these beliefs clearly informed the early development of the Children's Fund, where partnerships were expected to build on broad local strengths to meet locally defined needs. Of course, parallel approaches are difficult to achieve. We found, in the LIW study, that working across professional boundaries is often left to marginalised initiatives and individual practitioners because of resistance within established organisations to any erosion of institutional boundaries and relative power.

Prevention as a new form of negotiated practice

As we observed some time ago (Edwards, Gilroy and Hartley, 2002), the spaces for the exercise of teachers' responsible agency in England and parts of the US were dramatically

reduced in the early and mid 1990s through state intervention in curricula, approved pedagogies and quality assurance systems. The result was a narrow form of practice that focused on the delivery of the curriculum as a commodity. What was needed, we suggested, were social practices and relationships in schools that 'might support the development of informed, responsive and theorising teachers' (p. 123). We argued that this would, in turn, lead to problem solving, knowledge producing learners who would ultimately be able to contribute to their fields and not simply repeat what was already known. These arguments for practice, I suggest, are amplified when we look at the negotiated nature of preventative work.

In a recent paper (Edwards, 2004), I suggested that the ideal characteristics of the new multi-agency practice to disrupt children's trajectories of exclusion included the following.

- A focus on children and young people as whole people, i.e. not as specific 'needs'.
- Following the child's trajectory.
- An ability to talk across professional boundaries.
- An understanding of what other practitioners are able to offer the responsive package of protection that is built around the child or young person.
- Acknowledgement of the capacity of service users and their families to help to tailor the services they are receiving.
- An understanding that changing the trajectories of exclusion of children and young people involves not only building confidence and skills but also a reconfiguring of the opportunities available to them, i.e. systems-wide change.

There I examined each aspect separately. Here I shall explore what bringing them all together in a process of on-going negotiation might mean for practice.

Most strikingly, this new form of child-centred practice requires responses to the uncertainty of developmental trajectories rather than the delivery of planned arrangements. Children are not ready-made subjects who are recruited to rigidly designed practices on the basis of clearly defined categories of need. Their trajectories change as they are worked on and as external conditions change. Importantly, they are active agents in the shaping of their own experiences.

Professional practice therefore becomes more risky and warranted through their negotiations with children, families and other professionals (Nixon *et al.*, 1997; DEMOS-Hay, 2004). Furthermore, Nixon *et al.* suggest, negotiations with their publics may demand some distancing of professionals from the institutions that safeguard the boundaries of their practices. DEMOS-Hay (2004) describe this high risk practice as 'adaptive practice', which is characterised as a redrawing of local professional boundaries; and the authors point to the unease it can cause. They suggest that where this occurs, practitioners are led by loyalty to their locality, which provides a counterweight to and reduces what the authors call 'narrow professional loyalty' (p. 24). Our work, on the other hand, suggests that local loyalty is a fairly limited premise for multi-agency work.

The conceptual lens we took to examine inter-professional collaboration and negotiated practice was the idea of distributed expertise: that is, a recognition that knowledge is distributed across a system. Located in individuals and in material resources, it can be accessed by those who recognise and are able to make use of it (Edwards 2006). Along with DEMOS-Hay we emphasised how important it was for each professional to make their own expertise public and accessible to others. At the same time, we argued that

eroding the mystique of specialist professional knowledge does not mean a move towards the all-purpose generalist practitioner. Quite the reverse, it requires people to be more aware of their own expertise, how it relates to that of other practitioners and how they can connect their professional resources with the strengths that children and families bring to services. We therefore added reciprocity to the idea of negotiated practice and brought into play the responsibility of the client in the negotiations that support their actions.

As we worked with these lens, we found that loyalty to a locality was not a primary driver across the Children's Fund initiative. Though collaborative practice was often located within the situated affordances of localities (NECF, 2004). It seemed that a key feature was knowledge about what others could offer. The Children's Fund, perhaps because of its scale, has been able to help practitioners to recognise and draw on the expertise of others to support the trajectories of children and young people. A service provider reflected:

> It is about understanding at a deeper level. It's about connections … maybe you're not sure about the child we are thinking about, but as we talk it through there may be a connection and if not for that child, maybe for another child.

Another went further to consider what that meant for practice.

> It's adjusting what you do to meet other people's strengths and needs.

This is an enhanced form of professionalism, which is marked and warranted by successful negotiations with other professionals and the publics who both draw on and influence practices. I suggest that the skills used should be transferable, enabling people to move in and out of localities and work teams, and not be tied to particular local allegiances.

In NECF we found aspects of this form of negotiated, responsive and adaptive practice. We observed practitioners who were hacking new local trails along which they were guiding children and families so that they could access the expertise of other professionals. We also know that these trails were given impetus by the way that the Children's Fund workers brought practitioners together to discuss their work and the resources they had available (NECF, 2004; Edwards *et al.*, 2006).

Examples of practitioner engagement with children and their families in new more negotiated forms of practice were harder to find, at least in the earlier stages of the evaluation. The idea of responsive adaptive practice alongside users was not central to understandings of participation when the Children's Fund was set up. Initially, the contribution of participation to prevention was to be through involving children in the design, delivery and evaluation of services in order to refine services. It was a service-centred approach, emphasising consultation and evaluation. However, that approach to participation changed as practitioners became more used to the freedom of action afforded by some Children's Fund partnerships.

As the evaluation progressed, we found examples of subtle ways of linking participation more clearly to prevention: for example, by engaging children and their families in quite small decisions about what services did, which had a marked impact on their sense of self-efficacy (Evans *et al.*, 2006).

> I don't want to be big-headed but I came up with the idea of the conference. They responded to that – just little things we said we wanted.

> If I come across racism, I know how to deal with it. If I was in school I'd probably tell a teacher, or if I weren't I'd tell my mum and she would help me sort it . . . I won't beat them up, not now. (Children talking about their experiences of Children's Fund services)

These children felt they were making a difference and shaping aspects of the worlds they inhabited. The same was true of carers who worked with practitioners on disrupting their children's trajectories.

> Before I wouldn't come in and talk to people in school, it would be a case of they would phone me to talk to me and I would be like 'well yeah I will pick him up.' That was it. Whereas now I have the confidence to come in and talk to the teachers, tell them my problems, tell them what problems I have with the school. [the CF worker] has made me realise that I can do that without being victimised by the school. (Mother)

Conclusion

Comments like these are of course not unique to the Children's Fund; they could be the outcomes of good responsive practice anywhere. However, if we are to understand the bases of those outcomes and begin to analyse and then share the principles of the practices that produced them, we need more than descriptions of practices. I suggest that the CHAT approach to resilience helps us to recognise explicitly the value of assisting children to be positively effective in their worlds. By reminding us that we are both shaped by and shape our worlds it calls for a responsive practice, which involves working with the responsible agency of children and their families, enabling them to act on and change the conditions of their existence. A CHAT informed approach to resilience therefore calls for a shift in the centre of gravity, from the service to the practices, with more focus on enabling practitioners to work responsively with other professionals, and with clients and their networks.

Prevention does not necessarily involve on-going support. Children and young people, like Dreier's therapy clients (Dreier, 2000), need to be able to make micro-level decisions as they navigate settings which will ensure that they gain maximum support from those settings over time. The prevention of social exclusion involves working on both resilience and those aspects of environments that exclude. A CHAT approach provides a theoretical grounding for including a capacity to work on and change one's environment as an important aspect of resilience.

Note

1 LIW is part of Phase III of the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme. The team consists of Harry Daniels and Anne Edwards (co-directors), Jane Leadbetter, Deirdre Martin, David Middleton, Paul Warmington, Anna Popova, Apostol Apostolov and Steve Brown.

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