

RESILIENCE

HOW TO DEVELOP
RESILIENCE IN STUDENTS?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICIES



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Resilience. How to Develop Resilience in Students? (Recommendations for Public Policies)

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of resilience started to be explored in professional circles in the 1960s. In the 1970s, it also started to be addressed in the context of help for children in difficult life situations. Difficult situations leave marks in the lives of individuals. Substantial efforts and often also help from professionals and support from those around are required to process such situation in a constructive manner. However, the truth is that appropriate educational approaches may also be beneficial to children who have not experienced traumatic event and teach children how to process this kind of events when they encounter them at some point in their lives. Recent events indicate that this kind of prevention may have a significant impact on the ability to cope even with unexpected life situations and on the mental health in future.

This document aims to familiarize the workers of institutions which set trends in education with the resilience development options as early as at primary schools. On the following pages, readers will be presented with the main ideas and findings of the project that may serve as recommendations and inspiration for how to change work with students in the context of their personality development.



The aim of the project "Spotting and Strengthening Resilience Skills from Early Childhood" (ERASMUS+ PROJEKT 2020-2-HU01-KA205-079023) was to explore into, and put together, the methods of work with children that could help build their resilience from early childhood and that could also be applied by professionals in various fields. The project focused primarily on the practical application, and not just the theory behind. The authors of the project do realize that key to changing the routine is the preparation of professionals and completion of the required education.

As part of the project, a manual was prepared for teachers containing theory as well as activities with detailed methodological guidelines ready to be applied. They may be used systematically as part of the educational programme, but also individually within the emotional development of a student.

We also prepared training for teachers (and other helping professions) which introduces them into the issue of resilience and helps develop the related professional skills. The aim of the training is to teach the relevant professionals how to build resilience in their students or clients and also discuss topics relevant to their lives. The project was implemented in cooperation with professionals from Romania and Hungary who have long-lasting lecturing history at faculties of education as well as rich practical experiences with work with and the support of marginalised groups and children who have lived through difficult times. This international cooperation resulted in high-quality research and specialised publications we readily and happily distribute among teachers and other professionals.

for the investigation team
Tatiana Dubayová and Hedviga Hafičová



WHAT IS RESILIENCE?



Resilience is perceived as a personal trait characterised by the ability to cope with adverse circumstances in life and refers to the ability of individuals to recover from them. In the face of an adverse or dangerous situation, our adaptation mechanisms activate and help us adapt to the change. Masten et al. (1990) understands resilience as a process the outcome of which is successful adaptation that takes place despite the difficult or dangerous conditions. Currently most actual is the version of Canadian researchers of the International Resilience Project who define it as a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity (In Grotberg, 1997).

Resilience is the outcome of the interaction between the relevant individual, i.e. his or her personal traits, talents, skills, etc. on one hand and, on the other, the social environment consisting of family, peers, wider community, school, cultural norms, etc. (Kollar, 2011). At school, students are considered to be resilient when they are able to meet the requirements of the school and complete education at a sufficient level despite the adverse conditions of the environment they come from (Ceglédi, 2012).

WHICH SITUATIONS ARE DIFFICULT TO COPE WITH?

Grotberg (1995) lists challenging situations for children (as well as adults) which are difficult to cope with: death of parents or grandparents; divorce; separation; illness of parent or siblings; poverty; moving; family or friends; accident causing personal injuries; abuse, including sexual abuse; abandonment; suicide; remarriage; homelessness; poor health and hospitalizations; fires causing personal injury; forced repatriation of family; disabled family member; parent's loss of a job or income; murder of a family member; robberies; war; fire; earthquake; flood; car accident; adverse economic conditions; illegal refugee status; migrant status; property damage from storms, floods, cold; political detention; famine; abuse by a non-relative; murders in neighbourhood; unstable government; drought.



Many of these situations usually occur suddenly, and some of them may take very long time. Some children in classes may even have a very difficult life story. However, teachers may not feel qualified for work with them and may have concerns that work with such students may require skills they do not dispose of. This may lead to the rejection of such students by teachers for fear that they could even worsen their situation by inappropriate conduct.

HOW TO RECOGNISE CHILDREN WITH LOW RESILIENCE?

Children who manage to succeed despite adversities are described as resilient. They have certain strengths and use protective factors which help them overcome adversities and prosper (Zolkoski, Bullock, 2012). On the contrary, low-resilient children are unable to cope with difficulties they face and show behaviours that may incorrectly be attributed to other causes and may even cause more serious educational issues. The following chart that was developed by the American Psychiatric Association (2014) illustrates the signs of children by the areas in which they are shown.

Hence, the components of resilience can be found in the individual's determination to fight (this includes persistence, setting of goals, optimism and confidence in positive future), their supportive relationships (whether at the level of an individual, within communities, spirituality or, if the resilience of larger groups is explored, larger groups and communities), development of self-respect and positive self-image. It is now quite evident that although the components of resilience and the factors that are closely related to them are primarily associated with personality traits of the relevant individual, they also depend on the environment. If the environment and relationships are right, the environment is able to support the development of resilient personality.

COGNITIVE AREA	EMOTIONAL AREA	PHYSICAL AREA	SOCIAL AREA
DELAY IN SPEECH DEVELOPMENT	DIFFICULTY TO CONTROL BEHAVIOUR	WEAKENED IMMUNE SYSTEM	AGGRESSIVITY
DIFFICULTY TO LEARN LANGUAGES	DIFFICULTY TO CONTROL EMOTIONS	CHANGES IN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT	UNSTABLE RELATION
MEMORY PROBLEMS	LACK OF IMPULSE CONTROL	MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS	PEER REJECTION
LACK OF ABILITY TO CONCENTRATE	HIGH EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY	CHRONIC DISEASES	HOSTILE PERCEPTION
UNREADINESS FOR SCHOOL/SCHOOL FAILURE		OBESITY	

Symptoms of a child's lack of resilience in the cognitive, emotional, physical and social areas (APA, 2014)

IS THERE ANY GROUP OF CHILDREN THE RESILIENCE OF WHICH SHOULD BE GIVEN PRIORITY?

Children experiencing abuse and neglect, the so-called CAN. This is a complex social phenomenon with long-term consequences extending until adulthood. Even though the impact of abuse and neglect on children may vary, professionals agree that these children suffer from low self-confidence and lower self-worth, shame, and some of them are even diagnosed a post-traumatic stress disorder (Fahrudin, 2014). It is desirable to cooperate with a psychologist specialising in this kind of clients during any work with these children. The resilience development method that works well with these children is the multi-disciplinary approach. Individual steps should be taken carefully depending on how much they are affected by the adult's behaviour.



Child who lost a parent. Losing a parent is the most difficult, traumatic and a major loss to a person irrespective of the relationship and can be traumatic for a child (Purandare, Sathiyaseelan, 2018). These children are at more risk for suicide, criminality and psychiatric hospitalisation than the children who did not face any parental death. Resilience is an important shield for these children against negative emotions that can overtake them. It can be really challenging for professionals to help these children cope with those emotions in a healthy manner, and there are various educational programmes that can help prepare them for this challenge.

Children of parents with a mental illness. Osborn (1990) observed in his 10-year research project that mental illness of a parent, such as depression, significantly reduces child's resilience and success in life. Parental illness affects child's development at various ages differently – from disrupted emotional attachment with the parent in early childhood up to concentration difficulties, poor school performance and problem behaviour during adolescent years. At the same time, these children were found to respond more sensitively to the issues of others, they are more kind-hearted and patient, and their situation taught them to bear up a lot. However, they need environment that will allow them to be children, that will lift the burden of responsibility they carry on their shoulders at home.

IS THERE ANY GROUP OF CHILDREN THE RESILIENCE OF WHICH SHOULD BE GIVEN PRIORITY?

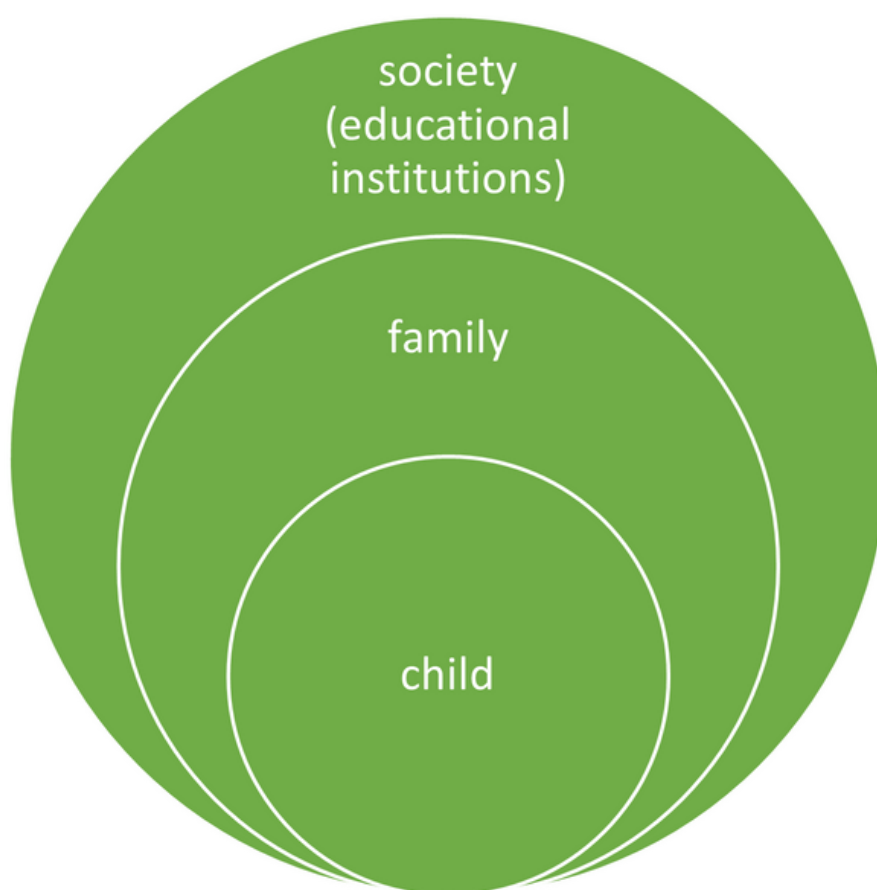
Children of drug addicted parents. Substance addiction is one of the most serious disorders of families that has a negative impact on all bonds, interactions, communication and overall operation of the family system (Bock 2008; Colman 2009). Children at the developmental stages sensitive to the fulfilment of basic needs and personality formation are particularly affected and badly need to have an individual in their lives who would compensate for the effects of the primary family on their development (Woititz 2002, Šavrnichová 2011). Depending on the nature of parental addiction, these children may experience significant issues with self-esteem, confidence in themselves as well as in other people, they have a prevailing feeling of loneliness. Their problems tend to be concealed behind the mask of a "good" and quiet child. The more they crave for attention and a healthy relationship with adults and support for their resilience.



Children who experienced war. Despite such a serious experience as war, not all children show symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of them can even have a fulfilling and healthy lives. How children cope with this experience depends mainly on the support they receive from their relatives and community, and whether or not they may continue to attend and not interrupt school (Betancourt, 2010). As in the case of CAN children, it is appropriate to consult other professionals when working with these children. However, the first step to their recovery is to create stable and structured environment with sufficient social support. Important role in their recovery and resilience development has the teacher who should be prepared for that.

AT WHAT LEVELS SHOULD RESILIENCE BE DEVELOPED?

Resilience is usually viewed as the process of exposure to adversity and "positive" adaptation to that adversity (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005; Luthar et al. 2000). Between the two points, there are plenty of protective factors, such as family, school, community and society, which quite probably affect the vulnerability to the effects of the adversity. While some individuals are able to step out of the adversity they are facing, others may need specialised and continuous support during their whole lives (Khanlou, Wray, 2014). Interventions to support resilience should be based on these factors, and when it comes to children, the initiative should be taken by the family and school as this is the primary community of a school-age child.



Levels of development of resilience

HOW CAN FAMILY BUILD RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN?

Family is the primary environment and has a dominant impact on the child's education, personal development and socialisation. Family satisfies their physical, mental and social needs, provides the background necessary for self-realisation, is the source of experience, model behaviour for life. (Fischer, Škoda, 2009). As regards the families from socially disadvantaged background (marginalised communities), their economic status is low. This status goes hand in hand with a whole range of adverse consequences for children including lower cognitive abilities, poor study results, poor mental health and behaviour disorders (Mackay 2003).



Although there are efforts to support resilience of families with children with disability in Slovakia, the attempts to work with the troublesome system of families from marginalised communities are successful at individual level only and no dramatic changes occur within communities. Osborn's 1990 study which focused on successful and resilient children coming from these communities showed that the support from parents and their interest in children played an important role in the success in their lives. Similar conclusions were also drawn by Herbers et al. in 2014 who confirmed that children from homeless families whose parents showed them affection had better school results than expected. This is why cooperation with parents which needs to be developed as much as possible is one of the measures recommended to create optimum conditions for achieving change and developing resilience.

WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS BE THE INSTITUTIONS TO DEVELOP RESILIENCE?

Schools can be viewed as a universal and free service which plays an important role in the development of individuals for at least 10 years of their lives (duration of compulsory education). Children are under control of a professional – teacher at least five hours a day. The two establish a relationship that is the first building block in the development of their knowledge, skills and personality. Section 4 of Act 245/2008 on upbringing and education (the School Act) includes under the goals of upbringing and education, without limitation, the following: a) teach students to develop and refine their personalities, teach them how to work in a team and be accountable for themselves; and b) teach them to control their behaviours, teach them how to protect their health and respect ethical values.

In the context of this law, development of resilience can be understood as a legitimate way to achieve those goals. It is therefore necessary to create an atmosphere of confidence, sharing and open communication at schools as safe conditions for the development of emotionality as the fundamental precondition of resilience. Nevertheless, one of the precondition for a teacher to be able to employ this kind of activities and be prepared for and open to work with the emotional world of students is specialised preparation.

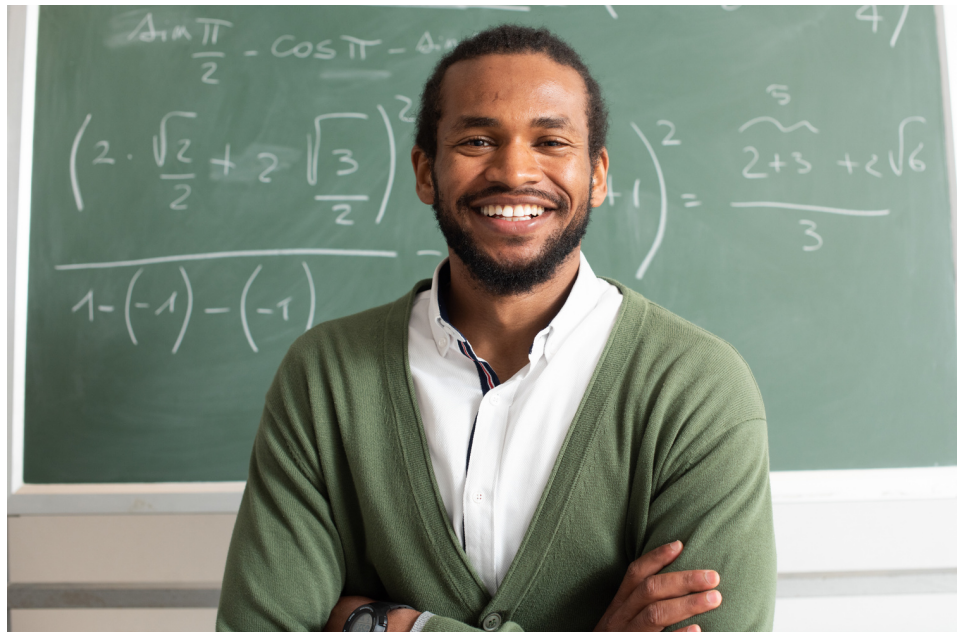


Middleton and Millican (2020) identify three perspectives for schools which want to help develop resilience in students:

- School as a system. School as a system may create space for the formation and development of resilience if the risk and protective factors (for both employees and students) are in balance.
- Use of teaching strategies supporting resilience: teaching and learning based on constructivist approach, exploration-based and experimental learning, learning by doing approach, and human-centred pedagogy, use of games in the education process, etc.
- Programmes (school and personal development) which focus not only on academic results, but also on the process that creates opportunities to explore interactions between the teacher and the student, supporting their own resilience, and then use the knowledge obtained at work with students (for development of their resilience).

HOW CAN RESILIENCE OF TEACHERS HELP DEVELOP RESILIENCE IN STUDENTS?

Teacher's resilience and ability to resist natural stress factors and failures in teaching profession is of significant importance in all areas of education. It is associated with the feeling of job satisfaction, ability to respond, efficiency, self-efficacy, self-esteem, quality of interpersonal relationships, autonomy, optimism, positive emotions, empathy, and overall emotional intelligence of teachers (Tait, 2008; Taylor, 2013). Such a complex personality may be a great support to and efficient factor in the development of students. Although it appears as a description of ideal harmonic development of a professional, more important than the result is the process of becoming such a personality. Teachers also sets an example to their students by showing how they cope with stressful situations they are exposed to.



Teachers and professionals who come from diverse cultural or minority environments are able to solve problems of their students from the same groups through understanding, they may help others experiencing similar fate to overcome the disadvantages of that environment (Kozma, Ceglédi, 2020; Hafičova et al., 2020). These teachers have an important mission – support the students and this way help them recognise and appropriately apply the knowledge and understanding of the teacher as a source of possible change. Ogbu and Simons (1998) speak of role models – the individuals who are academically and professionally successful and also managed to keep their minority identity and this way set a positive example to students from similar background. The work of teachers disposing of these characteristics can encourage, inspire and support motivation for learning and study in these students at school.

HOW TO KNOW THAT RESILIENCE IS LOW?

Individual resilience level can also be determined with the help of specific methods. These methods are based on the knowledge about post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of positive and negative events on the lives of individuals. The validity of some of the tests was checked abroad and the tests are used for professional as well as scientific purposes. However, they have not been checked in Slovakia yet. There also exists a group of questionnaires which only serve for deeper self-knowledge of the relevant individual and are used for educational purposes and as an input for further discussions on the issue. The methods to assess resilience which could inspire future research work and development of diagnostic methods in Slovakia include, for example: Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC 10) – can also be used for screening purposes; The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), and Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE) – research negative life events especially in home environment and ask about neglect and/or abuse by parents, sexual abuse, poverty, feelings of loneliness, drug abuse and criminal history); Reduced Life Event Scale (RLES) – assesses also the risks stemming from this or that negative life event; Donders' Test – serves as a self-knowledge tool and is also suitable for educational activities.

Of course, as every diagnostic method, also these should only be used by individuals having appropriate education, training and sensitivity to its use.

Every fifth child or adolescent in the European Union shows symptoms of developmental or emotional disturbance or problem behaviour, and one child of eight has also been diagnosed some mental illness (Braddick et al., 2009). In 2017, pedopsychiatrists in Slovakia examined 23,800 children aged 14 years and out of 5,386 of the children diagnosed for the first time, 49.2% had behaviour and emotional disorders; 11.2% had neurotic, stress-related and somatoform disorders (National Health Information Centre's statistics). Early identification of children showing symptoms which may be understood as problematic or risky by way of screening methods will help us reduce the cost of their treatment later on.

Early identification of children who need to support resilient behaviour may lead to early intervention. This, however, requires the development of valid diagnostic tools in compliance with the actual standards.



STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges relating to the engagement of families in the development of student's resilience

Recommendation: In case of a child with low resilience, also engage the family in the process at school.

Recommendation: Inform the professional team at schools (psychologist, special needs worker, social worker, etc.) of the options of resilience development with emphasis on students from groups at risk.

Recommendation: Create a network of mutual support of the families of low-resilient students in the form of self-help groups.

Recommendation: Engage the social policy institutions in the work with family, e.g. by way of programmes focusing on the improvement of the relations between families and schools.

STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges for the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic

Recommendation: Incorporate in the concept of education development in Slovakia also the recommendations for the development of resilience of children from groups at risk.

Recommendation: Support the preparation and accreditation of the programmes submitted by educational institutions which aim to build the competencies of teachers.

Recommendation: Create opportunities to apply for funds earmarked for development projects at schools focusing on the development of resilience of teachers, specialised employees and students.

Recommendation: Also support the publication of textbooks, specialised teaching and didactic materials focusing on the targeted development of resilience and support for the development of student's emotionality required to cope with distress situations.

Recommendation: Support experimental verification of the efficiency of educational programmes.

Recommendation: Support activities relating to the provision of social support to students from groups at risk also by way of extracurricular activities with the aim to develop resilient behaviour and capacity to cope with distress situations.

STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges for schools

Recommendation: Support open and constructive communication in the workplace and among employees and this way create the basic preconditions for healthy environment. Supporting teachers to become healthy role models in communication for students – this may also serve as a form of primary prevention of low resilience; this way, teachers may show students how to constructively cope with distress situations resulting from the social area.

Recommendation: Help teachers take active approach to the formation of their own teacher identity that would be based on realistic expectations and not idealised image of the teachers and their work.

Recommendation: Support healthy life style both in students and teachers. Within the support for mental health, the American Psychiatric Association recommends complex self-care. In other words, we should care for our physical well-being (sports, balanced diet, sufficient and good sleep), incorporate mindfulness practices in every-day life (keeping a diary, yoga, gratitude, etc.), and avoid negative coping strategies such as abuse of alcohol, drugs and other addictions.

Recommendation: Support communication between the family, student and teacher about the distress situations the student actually experiences.

Recommendation: Introduce methods of active support of students experiencing distress. Such methods include, for example, various types of mentoring, tutoring or coaching of students.

Recommendation: Ensure availability of professionals providing support to students, and not only the physical availability at school, but also in the legislative sense, i.e. giving children the opportunity to consult such professionals without unreasonable legislative barriers.

STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges for the pre-gradual preparation of teachers

Recommendation: Offer within education the subjects focusing on the preparation of teachers for more targeted work on the development of the emotional side of students. Develop trainings for the students at the departments of education, special education, therapeutic education and social education aiming to develop in them the skills required to build resilience in students.

Recommendation: Increase sensitivity of the students at the departments of education to the personal stories of students and develop the understanding of the context of school performance.

Recommendations: Incorporate in the didactic subjects the work with motivation and emotionality, and help students perceive them as an integral part of didactic procedures. The development of this skill also goes hand in hand with the barriers and negativism teachers may encounter at work.

STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges in resilience diagnostics

Recommendation: Create a new method, or adapt the existing diagnostic methods, to establish the approximate level of resilience and mental health of students at elementary schools for the purposes of regular screening. Part of the preparation of these diagnostic tools also is the elaboration of their standardised versions with norms for the Slovak population

Recommendation: Make the diagnostics of resilience and the assessment of threat to children's mental health part of standard diagnostic procedures employed by specialised employees at school. Early identification of problems the children face is closely connected with the success of the interventions applied, search for coping strategies, and resilience development.

Recommendation: Elaborate the procedures for specialised employees to be employed when they identify a child showing signs of lower resilience and poorer mental health. This also includes the support for the specialised employees to be prepared for the development of resilience in students and their continuous professional education.

STUDENT RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT



Challenges in resilience research

Recommendation: Survey the state of mental health of children in Slovakia, their coping strategies, and resilient behaviours by way of relevant research instruments.

Recommendation: Prepare and verify the diagnostic methods to survey resilience in child population. Elaboration of norms and standards should form part of this research project.

Recommendation: Clarification of the factors which affect the resilience of children and also those which are related to the occurrence of problem behaviours.

Recommendation: Within the application research, survey the efficiency of individual methods and methodological procedures in resilience development.

Recommendation: Clarify the role of resilience and stress coping in school performance, including with regard to their special education needs.

CONCLUSION

The abundance of biographies of famous individuals on the book market demonstrates our increased interest in the stories of successful people. We are looking for moments in their lives which predestined them for outstanding actions and want to find out what in their fate made them so strong, persistent and hard-working. Sometimes we cannot but start pondering whether we would act the same way if we were in their shoes or how we would end up if we faced similar twists of fate. Would we be able to find strength to fight or create?

The research of resilience which seems to be one of the key factors in the success at school and in life is looking for answers to many questions. Researchers continue identifying new and new correlations between resilience and other factors, for example the personality traits, parenting style, traumatic events, sources of support, etc., that help us cope with distress the way we do.

Resilience also has a significant practical dimension in challenges it brings to teaching and other helping professions.



Important for professionals who work with children is to also understand the consequences of this or that educational intervention, effect or parenting style for the future behaviour of children and be able to decide for the right one in the view of their life stories. This theme is also important from the perspective of care for the children who experienced some kind of psychological injury or even trauma because of growing up in a high-risk family or community.

Within the Spotting and Strengthening Resiliency Skills from Early Childhood project (Erasmus+ project 2020-2-HU01-KA205-079023), we aimed to explain this concept to the professionals working with children by way of specialised as well as scientific publications and helped them understand, through several meetings, the methods of development of resilience in students, their emotionality and open communication that is a prerequisite for learning what the children really need. We are confident that the spark ignited in this project will continue burning in other research and application challenges and will be nourished within system changes and for the benefit of healthy development of all students at Slovak schools.

for the investigation team
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