

Creating Resilient Learners

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The middle years of school, and specifically the transition between primary and secondary school, is a critical time for the promotion of resilience in students.

The shift between primary and secondary school offers students an opportunity to re-invent or consolidate their perceptions of themselves as capable and interested learners. Unfortunately, school transition has often been associated with a lowering in self-esteem and self-efficacy in students. Increases in psychological distress and lowered self-esteem (Simmons & Blyth 1987; Eccles & Buchanan 1996) and decreases in academic achievement (Chung, Elias & Schneider 1998) accompany this transition.

School change is a stressful event and results in lowered self-esteem, especially for girls if the school change occurs at the peak of pubertal change (Felner, Ginter & Primavera 1982). Consistently studies have found that girls and low-achieving students are more vulnerable to the negative effects of transition (Chung, Elias & Schneider 1998; Simmons & Blyth 1987; Lord, Eccles & McCarthy 1994).

The challenge presented by transition results in too many students becoming disengaged from school and lowering their sense of personal and academic self-competence. The key issue, therefore, is how we can assist students to become resilient during school transition, so that they can progress onwards to become interested and adept learners.

Resilience refers to the ability to overcome adversity and obstacles. Resilient learners are able to persist with problems and have a higher tolerance for not knowing.

The greatest inhibitor to learning is the fear that we will be exposed as inadequate. Transition requires students to establish new peer groups. Rather than risking exposure in front of a new and uncertain friendship circle, many students give up on pursuing academic success, switch off, feign illness, dumb themselves down and try to become as invisible as possible.

Learning is an emotional experience. We can no longer afford to see 'welfare' and 'curriculum' as separate entities. We need to integrate what we know about supporting students emotionally

with how we help them to learn, and this is especially so during the middle years of schooling.

Furthermore, learning is not just an emotional experience for students; it is a risky undertaking. What is at stake is their acceptance by their peers. The power of conformity and the strength of the desire to fit in (at almost any cost) during childhood and adolescence mean that many young people choose peer acceptance over educational success. Therefore, schools need to create a peer culture that has a positive attitude towards learning.

I suspect we have no more than three months from the commencement of secondary school, and perhaps much less time, before a peer group develops negative attitudes towards learning.

Schools can create a culture in which students can establish resilience in learning. This paper outlines some thoughts on the characteristics of resilient learners during the transition period. Broader strategies for supporting the self-esteem and emotional well-being of students during this time can be found in the *School Transition and Resilience Training* program (START) (Fuller, Bellhouse, Johnston & McGraw 2001) and *The Heart Masters* (Fuller, Bellhouse & Johnston 2001).

Persistence and Curiosity

Resilient learners persist where others give up. Persistence in the face of adversity requires a feeling of safety about not having achieved an answer yet. For this reason it is important that we emphasise that performance and learning can always be expanded and improved upon. Notions such as talent, ability, intelligence and aptitude all plant in students' minds that learning ability is a fixed commodity and that their performance reflects something about their level of capability that is unchangeable. It is far more preferable to create a culture in which students are taught to forget about their own ideas of how able they are and instead to hold a belief that almost anyone can learn virtually anything if they persist long enough.

Evidence suggests that successful girls may be the least resilient learners when faced with a difficult problem (Dweck 1984). It may be that successful girls have the least experience in grappling with difficulty. Boys are more often

told to 'stick with it', whereas girls may be told 'don't worry too much, you're good at something else'.

Persistence requires that we have at least some parts of the curriculum that allow students to develop ideas, mull over problems, think reflectively and overcome obstacles over time.

In addition to creating the habit of persistence, we need to make students more interested in the things they don't know than the things they do.

Concentration and Attention

The amount of learning we can do directly relates to our ability to concentrate and focus our attention. Einstein, Newton and Darwin were all noted for their ability to direct focused attention on problems.

Concentration is our ability to draw our energy towards a specific issue, which we can then attend to. There are two types of attention: one is diffuse and allows us to absorb information in an uncritical way without judging it; the other is more narrow and focuses on specific details. Both types of attention are necessary. For example, when you are crossing a road it is vital to keep your attention on the position of the car approaching you if you are to avoid being hit. However, it is also important to keep some attention for noticing diffuse events such as another car coming around a corner, or a truck overtaking and so on.

Attention requires the selection and preferential processing of relevant information and the suppression or inhibition of irrelevant information. Most of us are very skilled at screening out irrelevant information when we need to concentrate. For example, most of you will not have been aware of your shoes on your feet until your attention is drawn to them. There is evidence that children are less able to filter out irrelevant details and may need to actively learn this skill (Ridderinkof & van der Stelt 2000).

Like any other skill, concentration can be enhanced and made more automatic. Anyone who has learned a complex set of manoeuvres such as riding a bike, playing a musical instrument or driving a car will have experienced the initial concern of 'how do I concentrate on all these things at once', only to find that, with practice, they become easier.

Children improve their ability to prime and shift their attention as they mature, particularly if they are cued to do so. Engaging students in activities that allow them to practise focusing and shifting their attention is beneficial, especially when these exercises build these skills using each of the senses (sight, sound, touch and smell).

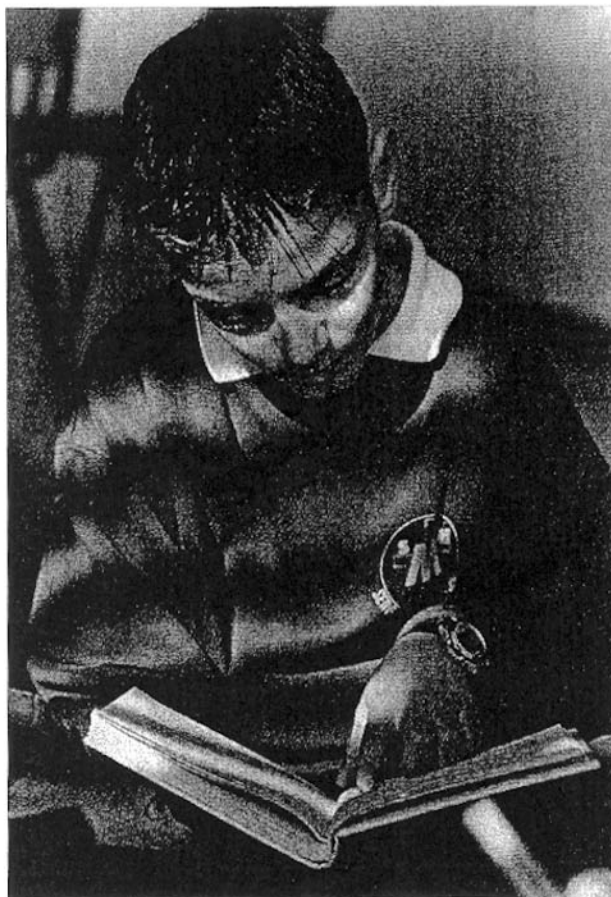


Photo: Porch Hawkes

A Year 5/6 student at St Mary Magdalen's School, Chadstone, concentrating on his reading.

Shifts in attention can vary over milliseconds as different aspects of a situation are amplified. We can also learn to attend to specific aspects of a situation by 'tuning', just as sportspeople learn to make fine judgments of a situation by focusing themselves through practice.

Extensive practice allows for the development of pathways of attention. This is the sense that some aspects of a performance can be so well rehearsed that they can be perceived as happening automatically. Some musicians speak of 'finger memory', where they no longer need to consciously think about what they are playing and attention can be freed up for other activities.

To this extent persistence and attention are intertwined. To persist with a task requires the ability to dampen or inhibit negative emotions – otherwise attention focuses on frustration and persistence ends (Fernandez-Duque, Baird & Posner 2000). This means that being a resilient learner requires more than just being able to overcome distressful feelings and adversity; it also involves being able to make mistakes.

Ability to Make Mistakes

Resilient learners are more willing to have a go and are more able to tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing. We need to show students how to make mistakes, how to tolerate not knowing (over periods of time), how to be inconsistent.