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Resilience and the social work curriculum

Tom Considine

Despite claims made shortly after the Autumn Spending Review 2015, the age of austerity is set to continue under the sole auspices of the Conservative government at least until 2020 ('Autumn statement: IFS warns on tax rises and spending cuts', *Guardian* 26/11/15). However, a possible answer has emerged to the growing levels of poverty (O'Hara 2014), widening degrees of social and economic inequality (Atkinson 2015) as well as an intergenerational divide in life opportunities (Standing 2013): it is resilience. Or rather, a dominant notion of resilience is emerging which is being touted as the solution to the problems above.

For example, the president of the Rockefeller Foundation has recently (2015) published a book offering solutions to the world's most pressing problems, titled *The Resilience Dividend: Managing disruption, avoiding disaster, and growing stronger in an unpredictable world*. First, considering the institution of which this person is president, the approach here is unsurprisingly supportive of continuing the neo-liberal model from whence most of the social problems have emerged. Secondly, the title itself is indicative as to why resilience is being promoted as the solution to our social problems. It fits with the prevailing neo-liberal orthodoxy. The use of the word 'dividend', with its glaring connotations of investment, financial speculation and profitable gains immediately frames it within the world of free-market enterprise. The sub-title, with its accumulation of gerunds (infinite and active verbs such as 'managing', 'avoiding' and 'growing'), fits with the blossoming 'can-do' literature of self-improvement. The work itself seeks to offer solutions to what it sees as the world's most pressing problems (economic uncertainty, the effects of over-population and environmental deterioration) by indicating ways both individuals and societies can work to protect themselves from such adversities and sustain their own survival. The analysis never questions or challenges the structural and political framework which shapes these crises (Rodin 2015).

Within the field of education a similar development has manifested itself. In response to a

report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in 2014, chaired by former Labour Health Minister Alan Milburn, which claimed that social mobility had stalled in the UK and inequality was growing, the headmaster of Westminster School, Mark Mortimer, responded with a solution in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (27/05/15) with the heading: 'Pupils need lessons in resilience if they are to improve their lot in life'. He said that private schools were working with state schools to improve the admission process as it would be based on 'ability rather than ability to pay' and if one wanted to know the answer to lack of social mobility, '... one should consider the *Character and Resilience Manifesto*, produced by the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility, which makes a clear connection between the development of character and perseverance (along with other 'soft' skills) and social mobility'. According to this manifesto, there is widespread evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely than their more affluent peers to possess these 'soft skills'.

Significantly, this manifesto supports the view that character and resilience can be developed. It defines them as 'umbrella terms for a range of attributes that help people to make the most of opportunities as they arise, to stick at things and to bounce back from adversity'. Embedded in these proposals is the notion that those from lower social orders lack the right moral fibre to cope with the demands of this world, and those from a higher social order can benignly offer them a way to learn these qualities. It is, in effect, a heady mixture of nonsense, racism, class hatred, disrespect for teachers, and purposeful denial of the deep-rooted structural causes of educational inequality.

The promotion of resilience within social work education has been prevalent for the last few years. It was originally promoted with regard to the way it would support service users. It is largely associated with a model known as a 'strengths-based approach' (Saleeby 2002), which is characterised as identifying unrecognised coping abilities in people

and communities that normally experience exclusion. People are helped to find ways to adapt to difficult circumstances. More recently, social work students are encouraged to develop resilience as part of their professional practice. There is a growing body of research seeking to identify the qualities which underpin resilience and how they can be embedded in the curriculum. Indeed, it could be argued that there is an emerging resilience industry, as, over the last few years, there has been a conference on protecting oneself from burnout in social services, a toolkit freely available in order to help one survive increasingly difficult work conditions, and a webinar discussion promoting resilience. (It is somewhat ironic that the speaker on this topic had to reschedule the proposed talk owing to ill-health. It may not be as effective as the rhetoric claims.)

On the face of it, such a development seems logical, as social work is, by its very nature, a challenging job and requires a robust character. The most comprehensive study (Grant and Kinman 2014) draws upon a disparate range of ideas, ranging across positive psychology, self-help therapy, eastern philosophy and business jargon. At the heart of the various methods and techniques that one can undertake to acquire is the need for the individual to learn to be flexible to the demands placed upon him/her. This approach plays down the significance of the social environment in which the student must try to survive. It places the responsibility exclusively on the individual, and if he/she is struggling to manage the pressures, then it is a result of his/her personal shortcomings rather than the circumstances he/she has to face.

We are giving social work students much to be resilient about. As well as incurring the highest HEI fees in the world (OECD Report – *Guardian*), along with the likelihood that they will increase again over the next five years, they have to contend with a reduction in bursary support for their placement training, and 25 per cent of them have no bursary support at all. (As with other professional courses, social work students have to undertake work-place training as part of their professional education, and they have traditionally received financial support, because the requirements are equivalent to a full-time job and the options to supplement their income via other work are restricted.) On top of this, the opportunities for future employment will be restricted, as cuts to social services will continue unabated for at least another five years.

In order to counter this pervasive but potentially divisive and pathological ideology, there is an alternative approach called social resilience (Hall and Lamont 2013), in which resilience is sustained by social cooperation and collegiate support. This

idea is being developed in at least one social work curriculum (Considine, Hollingdale and Neville 2015). It offers a critique of the dominant model of resilience as described above, and also seeks to promote the benefits of a mutually enhanced learning environment through group work activities. Students are encouraged to identify their respective strengths and how they can support their colleagues, as well as how they can be supported by their peers in the learning exercises. This is a model which is still in its infancy, and the exploration of other opportunities is under-way. (The present article seeks only to draw attention to one notion of resilience, which in fact sustains the very problems it seeks to protect us against, and to indicate this other way forward.)

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