

Helping students stay in higher education: building resilience



Jacqueline Stevenson
Leeds Metropolitan University
j.stevenson@leedsmet.ac.uk



Who stays and who goes?



- Nationally 14% fail to complete their course (HESA)
- Male; mature; those with lowest prior educational achievements more likely to drop out
- DfES (2007) drop out rates for BME higher than for White
- Drop out highest at Post-1992 with highest number of students from lowest socio-economic groups (HESA, 2009); lowest at Oxbridge
 - Fear of debt and monies worries (Furlong and Forsyth, 2003)
 - Lack of fit (Quinn, 2004; Longden, 2004)

What is resilience?



The ability to bounce back or cope successfully despite substantial adversity or stress

The "ability to recover rapidly from difficult situations as well as being the capacity to endure ongoing hardship in every conceivable way" (Walker et al, 2006, p. 251)



Resilience



- Two co-existing conditions:
 - Threat/risk to well-being e.g. experience of terror, stress, discrimination, isolation, poverty, bereavement etc.
 - Positive adaptation despite the adverse conditions encountered



Resilience depends on



Protective factors (external assets)

- People or resources

Resilience traits (internal assets)

- Benard (1996) four traits: Social competence; Problem-solving skills; Autonomy; A sense of purpose and future - an elaborated 'possible self'



External Asset Clusters

E-1. Caring Relationships

- Lecturers/tutors/support staff
- Peers
- Friends
- Family

E-2. High Expectations

- Within the home
- Within the institution
- Within neighbourhood and community
- Within peer network

E-3. Meaningful/Authentic Participation

- In the home
- In educational setting
- In the community

Internal Asset Clusters

I-1. Social Competence

- Cooperation and communication skills
- Empathy and respect
- Problem solving skills

I-2. Autonomy and Sense of Self

- Personal conviction
- Self-efficacy
- Self awareness

I-3. Sense of Meaning and Purpose

- Future focus/elaborated sense of possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986)
- Optimism
- Goals and achievement
- Motivation

Adaptation of Constantine et al's (1999) Resilience Assessment Theoretical Framework

Recent research



Aims

- To explore qualitatively how a sense of future self can impact on students' resilience while studying at HE; to investigate the extent to which students can set and achieve realistic goals for themselves in relation to HE that can potentially reduce the risk of them dropping out

Methods

- 20 students: nine women and eleven men; BME, LAC, WWC ; see them as other than 'deficit' or 'problematic'
- interviews narrative in structure; analysed keeping the students' stories intact: exploring the difficulties students had encountered, how they saw their futures, what resources they drew on, external and internal aspects of resilience

Ethnic Minority Students



- Research by DfES (2007) and HEA (2008):
 - Participation of BMEs higher than Whites but attainment lower - even after controlling for e.g. gender, disability, deprivation, type of HEI, prior attainment etc.
 - i.e. being from a BME group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment ; Attainment gap remains the largest for Black Caribbean, Black African and Chinese students
- BMEs less likely to be in employment 6 months after graduating than White
- Reasons are complex (teaching and assessment activities? institutional racism? 'possible selves' constrained by what they/others consider achievable? (Sommerlad, 2006; 2009; Stevenson, 2010)



LAC/Care Leavers



- The educational achievement of LAC is notoriously low
 - End of school year 11 only 13% of LAC obtained 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at grades A*- C (compared with 62% of all children); only 66% remained in full-time education (compared to 80% of all school-leavers) (DfCSF, 2008)
 - No statistics available for attainment at A-Level or participation in HE, but Jackson et al (2005) estimate that only 1-2% of care leavers go to university (compared with 43% of all children)
- Therefore, those who do go to university are likely to be those who have shown the greatest resilience
- Stein (2005): LAC fall into three groups: 'moving on', 'surviving' and 'victims' of their care experience in their current lives; care leavers with most resilience were likely to be in the first and second group and less likely to be in the third



White working-class students



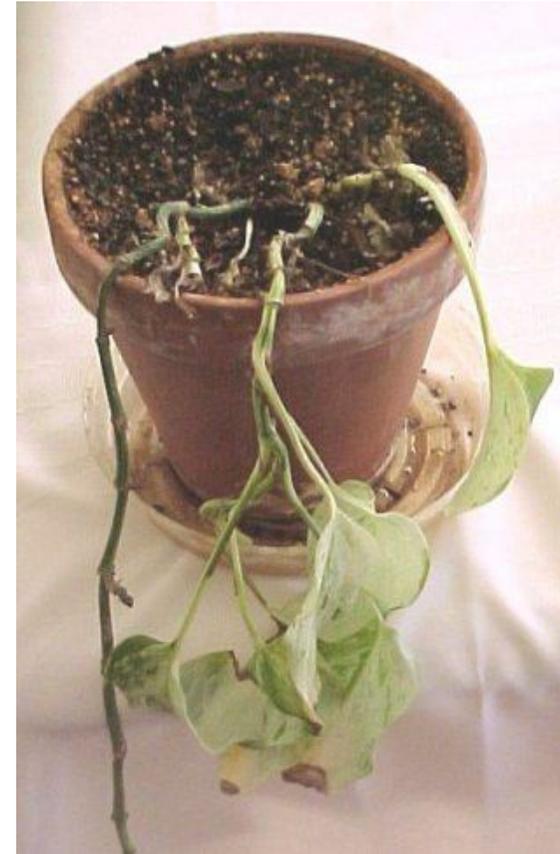
- White W-C *males* are severely under-represented in HE - 25% of accepted male applicants (NAO, 2008) ; attainment of school qualifications is the principal reason, but social class also remains a strong determinant
- Research with WWCs:
 - ‘not for people like them’ (Archer et al, 2001)
 - fear of getting ‘above themselves’ (Archer and Leathwood 2003)
 - positioned as the ‘other’ of higher education (Read et al, 2003)
 - identified as being deficient and ‘unprepared’ for learning (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003)
 - unwilling to adopt a ‘student’ identity so more likely to drop out (Thomas, 2002, (Christie et al, 2007)
- Those who remain are likely to have developed ‘resilient traits’ (Crozier and Reay, 2008)
- But the ‘possible selves’ of WWC boys may be constrained by what they envisage as achievable and what others envisage is achievable for them.



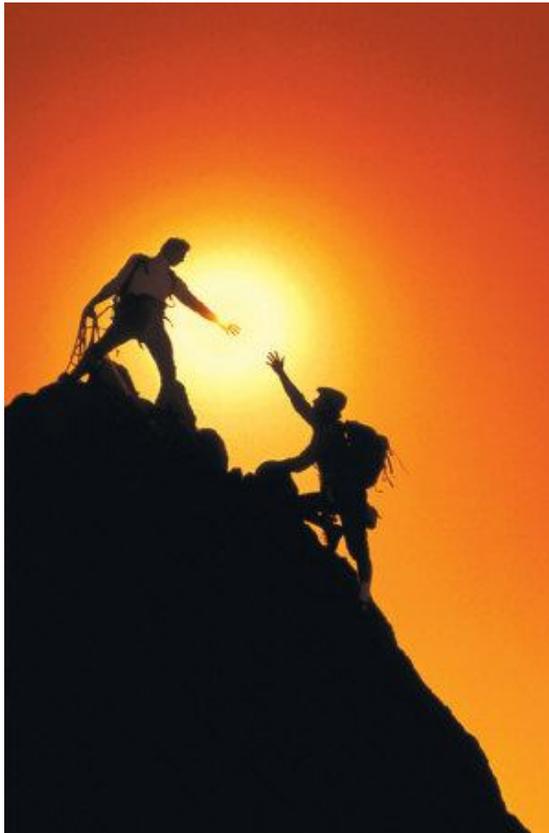
Sense of purpose: John



"I was the first like in all of our family to go to university and like the pressure was enormous 'cos everyone was so proud and like expecting great things of me. I was sort of living their hopes you know? And then you get here and you think 'well now what?' And all of a sudden you are supposed to know what you are going to do for the rest of your life and I thought 'but I've only just got here' and I didn't have a clue. I started panicking then and I nearly left in my first year. I took a long time before I got my head around that but then I thought 'well it's just up to me isn't it? I can either fail or succeed'"



High expectations: Mickey



"to be honest my parents couldn't see the point of me being here and it was like 'why don't you just get a job?' and also if I'm honest I'm not sure they thought I would stick it. And when it got really hard and I was stressed with course work and assignments and stuff I thought 'well I'm going to fail anyway' and I was at the point of giving up when I went to see Shelly [tutor] and she realised that something was wrong and so we had a meeting and she was really good. She just made me think about what I wanted out of life and made me realise that I wasn't on my own finding it tough. And she helped me get to grips with the assignments"

Caring Relationships: Aaliyah



"I think Andy [social worker] was the one that helped me out the most because I spoke to him and he would go you know, "Keep on going." [but] ... there have been odd times when I really needed someone and they haven't been there. That is quite depressing because obviously Saturday, Sunday I can't ring Andy because it's past the office hours or like when my sister is busy with her own family and she can't always be there. And like with my friends they have got their own lives so there has been a couple of times when I have been really, really stressed or depressed"



Authentic Participation: Siobhan



"there were quite a lot of pressures on me when I first came to Uni to do things that maybe I didn't want to do ...just like drugs and general partying for 3 days solid and you know not worrying about studying....you just want to fit in so you do things you don't want to. And then you feel bad and it's like you feel like you have let yourself down. I was becoming some one I didn't want to be and it took a lot of strength to say 'no I'm not doing that' and then to find another place to fit in and other people to be with, 'cos you're scared of being alone but I just had to stick it out"



Key findings



- These students had developed resilient traits
 - Emotional awareness, perseverance, internal locus of control, optimism, willingness to draw on support, perspective, sense of humour, etc.
- Due to dealing with prior adversity
 - poverty, bereavement, mental illness, family breakdown, taken into care etc.
- And were able to draw on these traits when encountering difficulties in HE which might result in other students dropping out
 - failing an assignment, accommodation problems, home sickness, financial problems etc.

Key issues



- Supporting students during both the transition to HE and beyond is critical. However:
 - it is insufficient to rely on students developing resilient traits without support
 - Fostering resilience requires a critical re-examination of institutional culture, policy, and structures to provide "protective processes" within the HE environment
 - Minimising risk and strengthening protective processes requires fundamental change in the beliefs, visions, rituals, and behaviours of both academic and support staff so that
- *Where "policies, structures, programmes and practices are designed to protect, nourish, and support student development rather than categorize, inhibit and punish students who do not fit the mould" (Winfield, 1994)*



Conclusions



Four major institutional protective processes

1. Reducing negative outcomes by altering 'risk' or exposure to risk
2. Reducing negative chain reactions following risk exposure
3. Establishing and maintaining self-esteem and self-efficacy
4. Opening up opportunities for students

(adapted from Rutter, 1987)

