

Positive Youth Development and Resilience amongst Early School Leavers

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Abstract

This study examines Early School Leaving (ESL) and resilience in young people aged 15–20. It explores effects of negative internalised stereotypes on Early School Leavers (ESLs). Three Positive Youth Development (PYD) programmes were used to challenge these stereotypes in one Youthreach centre. 19 participants recruited from a Youthreach centre participated in the programmes including: Research Action Project (RAP), GAISCE, and Canoeing Skills. A cycle of discrimination, depression and drug use were important issues affecting the lives of ESLs.

Keywords: Early School Leaving, Resilience, Positive Youth Development, Youthreach

Introduction

Working with Early School Leavers (ESLs) for nearly ten years has caused me to try to gain a better understanding of the causes and effects of ESL. During this time, I observed a tendency among ESLs to conform to certain stereotypes. They seemed to have a warped sense of identity, which accentuated the negative. They lacked hope for the future, and so took no action to improve their situation or prospects. Brown (2005) comments, 'trainees often present with a profound sense of rejection, alienation, low self-esteem and behavioural problems'. When stereotypes are internalised, they may cause people to behave as if the stereotypes were true, regardless of whether or not, this is the case. At the beginning of every year, when meeting my new learners for the first time, I ask 'why is it you are all here in this room here today having left school, what is it you all have in common?' The inevitable answer provided is 'we are scumbags'. Changing this perception is the challenge for ESL educators. ESLs may believe that they have failed as a result of flaws in their character and because they

are unworthy or bad. Fannon (1952) discusses how an inferiority complex in oppressed people manifests with belief that the oppression is justified and the dominant narrative is correct. Stokes (2003) refers to this phenomenon as a 'morbid stereotype', while Lamont (2000) refers to this as the narrative of the 'working class loser', Durkheim (1893) refers to it as 'anomie'.

ESLs typically come from at risk groups within society and have experienced significant adversity, O'Mahoney (1997) and Leonard (1998) suggest that there is a strong correlation between ESL and criminality in later life. Haase (2010), Comiskey (2003) and the HSA (2008) suggest a correlation between ESL and substance misuse. Mc Garr (2010), NACDA (2014), Stokes (2002) and Barnados (2009) suggest a correlation between anxiety, depression, and lower level of mental health and well-being and ESL. ESLs who experience these difficulties need to develop life skills that can help them to deal with and overcome these issues. Resilience, which might be defined as the ability to adapt to adversity, is a key trait that can help young people from falling into a cycle of negative psychology and avoid internalising the negative stereotypes that they are subjected to.

Resilience

In environments where young people feel safe and supported by their families and wider community, they are more resilient, 'our results indicated that the combination of high home support, community support and buoyancy was associated with the most adaptive student outcomes' (Collie *et al.*, 2016 p. 13). The environment in which a young person develops plays a crucial role in their capacity for resilience, 'a social-ecological perspective of resilience would thus entail consideration of how the environment supports and/ or hinders resilience-related processes leading to well-being across various domains of a young person's life' (Lal *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). The social ecology of a young person also plays a major role in their general health and wellbeing. Schools make up part of a young person's social ecology and therefore play a valuable role in developing resilience, 'if school experiences and teacher pupil interactions can boost resilience, schools become a key site to compensate for resilience resources that are missing in students' lives' (Liebenberg *et al.*, 2016, p. 142). The school is important for young people to develop resilience therefore the teachers who work in the school and the relationships they cultivate with their students are also useful in developing resilience.

The value of transformative youth-adult relationships is that they offer the most vulnerable youth a resource for well-being. When these relationships facilitate access to pro-social expressions of personal talents, the result is likely to be adaptive behaviour among youth who face multiple risk factors (Ungar, 2013, p. 334).

Forging relationships of trust is important when dealing with at risk youth, trust and respect help young people believe in their own self efficacy. To the individual ESL represents a terrible waste of potential. The human cost is lack of opportunity, 'education is a powerful predictor of adult life chances and those who leave school with little or no education have access to fewer opportunities in later life' (Barnardos, 2009). Lack of opportunity suffered by ESLs can have more serious implications that continue throughout a person's life by lower levels of general and mental health and increased likelihood of criminal involvement, 'Early school leavers have lower levels of general health, report more anxiety and depression and have a higher mortality rate' (Mc Garr, 2010, p. 13). Lack of opportunity, poorer mental and physical health and an increased likelihood of involvement in criminality are the costs of ESL to the individual who may have left school due to circumstances over which they have no control.

Personal development and the development of self-esteem are core values in Youthreach as are the development of independent young people who can set goals and commit to them. Though Youthreach seeks to develop practical and vocational skills, this is not the sole purpose of the programme and employment and practical skills are important to ESLs and the societies in which they live. Though they are not, and should not be, the sole focus of the ESL centre. Youthreach could itself be considered a Positive Youth Development (PYD) Programme: 'the report praises the positive atmosphere of centres, and the considerable time and effort devoted by Youthreach staff members to getting to know learners individually—their background, their parents and families' (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, 2010, p. v). Multiple studies confirm the importance of confidence building in PYD, (Campos, 2004; Lerner *et al.*, 2002; Lofquist, 2009; Cherubini 2014; Scales 2010; Scales *et al.*, 2011). Confidence is fostered in young people through positive thinking, treating them with respect and through the completion of tasks and goals. Young people learn that if they can do it once, they can do it again. When young people become experienced at a task their confidence grows. ESL is a symptom of social reproduction. It can damage individuals, their communities and society. The following interventions were conducted to examine their effect on resilience in ESLs.

The Interventions

Three PYD programmes offered three sets of challenges: The Research Action Project (RAP), GAISCE, and Canoeing Skills. The RAP programme involved participants researching a problem affecting their own lives and initiating a positive action to deal with the problem. The RAP programme was designed using Young People at Risk (YPAR) methodology to allow young people feel empowered to raise consciousness about social issues affecting them. This programme was of 26 weeks' duration.

The GAISCE programme involved participants meeting the requirements of the bronze GAISCE award are to commit 13 hours of community involvement, of physical recreation, of developing a special skill and a further 13 hours of either community involvement, physical recreation, or developing a special skill. The award is completed with an adventure journey in which they complete a thirty-kilometre hike over two days. GAISCE, the President's Award is the equivalent of the Duke of Edinburgh Award in the Irish Republic. GAISCE is a charity organisation run by the Office of the President, the skills the programme seeks to build in young people are: goal setting and achievement, communication, determination, collaboration as part of a team, positivity in the face of adversity, and leadership. This programme was of 26 weeks' duration.

The Canoeing Skills programme challenged the participants to learn the techniques and safety skills to safely navigate moving water as part of a group. Canoeing Skills challenged young people to navigate moving water as part of a team. As part of the Canoeing Skills programme participants had to complete two certificates: River Safety and Rescue 1 (RSR1) and Level 2 Skills leading to a level four QQI component certificate in Canoeing Skills. This programme was developed by Canoeing Ireland as part of the National Adventure Sports framework. This programme was of 8 weeks' duration.

Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM)

Participants were asked to fill out the CYRM psychometric measure before beginning any of the PYD interventions. Their scores were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. After the completion of each programme participants were again asked to fill out the CYRM and their scores were recorded and entered into an excel spreadsheet. Their initial scores were subtracted from their later scores and the variance was recorded. Only 15 of the 19 participants had CYRM scores recorded at the end of their participation as they had left the centre and could not be contacted. The 15 participants had their initial score subtracted from their final score and the variance for all participants increased by 81 CYRM

points for the group as a whole. This represented a nine percent average increase in resilience for the group as a whole as the total group resilience increased from 965 to 1046. The percentage increase per group was calculated by dividing the total variance (81) by the total score for the group from test 1 and multiplying by 100. The percentage average increase in resilience for all participants was 8%¹.

Table 1. Variance in Resilience

ALL																
	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Josephine	Eugene	Sara	Joe	Darren	Charlie	Morgan	Clare	John	Evan	Polly	Total
Test 1	66	70	57	73	61	64	75	51	63	68	64	69	49	64	71	965
Test 2	66	86	62	67	64	69	74	67	68	80	66	77	75	53	72	1046
Variance	0	16	5	-6	3	5	-1	16	5	12	2	8	26	-11	1	81

Participants were grouped according to the number of PYD interventions they took part in which created 3 categories for analysis: 1 PYD (as participants in this category had only participated in one programme), 2 PYD and 3 PYD. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook one PYD programme was 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook two PYD programmes was also 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook three PYD programmes was 6%.

Table 2. Participation in Programmes and Resilience

3 PYDS								
	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Total			
Test 1	66	70	57	73	266			
Test 2	66	86	62	67	281			
Variance	0	16	5	-6	15			
2 PYDS								
	Jessica	Eugene	Sara	Joe	Darren	Charlie	Morgan	Total
Test 1	61	64	75	51	63	68	64	446
Test 2	64	69	74	67	68	80	66	488
Variance	3	5	-1	16	5	5	2	42
1 PYD								
	Clare	John	Evan	Polly	Total			
Test 1	69	49	64	71	253			
Test 2	77	75	53	72	277			
Variance	8	26	-11	1	24			

1 Rounded to the nearest whole number

Participants were then grouped according to the PYD programme they took part in which created 3 categories for analysis: RAP, GAISCE and Canoeing Skills. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the RAP programme was 9%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the GAISCE programme was 10%. The percentage average increase in resilience for participants who undertook the Canoeing Skills programme was 7%.

Table 3. Variance in Resilience Per PYD Programme

RAP													
	Clare	Mark	Josephine	Timmy	Harry	Eugene	John	Sara	Helen	Joe	Charlie	Evan	Total
Test 1	69	57	61	70	73	64	49	75	66	51	63	64	762
Test 2	77	62	64	86	67	69	75	74	66	67	68	53	828
Variance	8	5	3	16	-6	5	26	-1	0	16	5	-11	66
GAISCE													
	Charlie	Helen	Tommy	Mark	Sara	Josephine	Morgan	Joe	Total				
Test 1	68	66	70	57	75	61	64	51	512				
Test 2	80	66	86	62	74	64	66	67	565				
Variance	12	0	16	5	-1	3	2	16	53				
Canoeing Skills													
	Charlie	Helen	Polly	Tommy	Mark	Harry	Darren	Morgan	Total				
Test 1	68	66	71	70	57	73	63	64	532				
Test 2	80	66	72	86	62	67	68	66	567				
Variance	12	0	1	16	5	-6	5	2	53				

Table 4. CYRM Scores for Each Positive Youth Development Programme

	All	RAP	GAISCE	CANOE SKILLS	3 PYDS	2 PYDS	1 PYD
Test 1	965	762	512	532	266	446	253
Test 2	1046	828	565	567	281	488	277
Difference	81	66	53	35	15	42	24
Percentage	8%	9%	10%	7%	6%	9%	9%
Participants	15	12	8	8	4	7	4

Participants in the GAISCE programme had cumulatively the largest percentage improvement in their CYRM scores outperforming the group as a whole by two percent. Participants in the RAP programme had the second largest cumulative improvement in CYRM scores and the largest individual improvement. Three participants showed a drop in their resilience scores and one showed

no change at all. Two of these participants were cohabiting and had unstable living arrangements. The remaining participant also had quite an unstable living arrangement. The participant who showed no change was related to the cohabiting participants and challenging family circumstances might account for the CYRM score. Participants who took part in three programmes experienced a smaller increase in their resilience scores than the participants who took part in two. This might suggest that there is a diminishing return in resilience with PYD programmes as students become fatigued with the process and that living circumstances can have an impact on resilience.

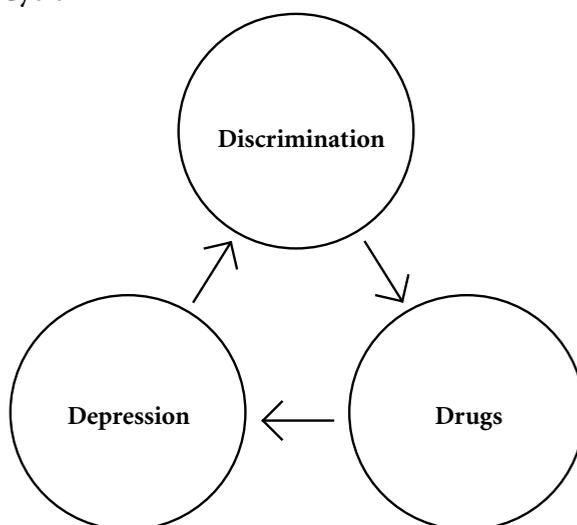
The single greatest increase in resilience came from a student who participated in the RAP programme. The next three highest reported increases came from students who participated in one or more programmes. The highest normally distributed improvements in CYRM came jointly from two learners who participated in all three programmes and a learner who participated in RAP and GAISCE. The second highest normally distributed improvement came from a learner who participated in GAISCE and Canoe Skills. Participation in the GAISCE programme seems to have had the greatest impact on CYRM scores, followed by RAP and Canoe Skills. The GAISCE and RAP programmes were completed over a twenty-six-week period and the Canoe Skills programme was completed over an eight-week period. It might be possible that the Canoe Skills programme could be equally or more effective than the other two programmes given a greater period of time in which to run the programme. This would also suggest that to maximise the resilience building potential of PYD programmes they should be designed as long term programmes. The quality of the interventions may also have been a factor in the variance in CYRM scores between programmes, the Canoeing Skills programme did not formally contain any aspect of service learning though this could be integrated in future programmes.

Key Themes that Emerged from the Research

Three key issues that arose as a result of the interventions are: drug use, depression and discrimination. There is likely a cyclical relationship between these three themes which is shown in figure 1 below and dubbed the D Cycle. Action research was an appropriate research methodology to use as participants could then confront the problems they were experiencing and take action to improve their situations. Mini-research projects of participants in the RAP programme and their findings, actions and outcomes are examined. Each of the three PYD programmes are compared and discussed with relevance to their

ability to promote resilience in ESLs. All of the mini-research projects had a corresponding action. Presentations and information sheets were prepared and distributed by the learners and many learners made presentations for the first time. The more relevant an issue was to the Youth Researchers the more time they devoted to the project.

Figure 1. The D Cycle



They responded well to doing research into problems affecting their own lives. Learners also seemed to become most engaged when they had real life experience of the problem they were researching. The learners in the centre worked towards the Leaving Certificate Applied qualification which involves continuous assessment of key assignments that must be completed, these assignments are often done in isolation and having a mini-research project to work on gave these assignments a unified purpose and provided scope for cross-circular integration. Students had a unified purpose behind their work when analysing data in spreadsheets, and writing their reports, rather than completing their key assignments by following a series of unrelated worksheets. Participants had an amalgamated objective relating to a real world problem that they were trying to solve which gave relevance in their learning to their own lives. The programmes were also designed to expose participants into new settings and activities in which they could establish relationships with new people. The programmes also required participants to engage in peer support in order to complete tasks. These aspects of the programme design were incorporated to overcome isolation and alienation and in doing so combat depression. The

programmes also had elements of outdoor education and thrill seeking in their design to offer an alternative to the 'buzz' of drug-taking.

Discussion

The D Cycle, discrimination, depression and drug use are challenging problems affecting the lives of ESLs. The RAP programme identified drugs, depression and discrimination as issues for ESLs. The personal reflections of participants and the RAP programme confirm this. There is likely a cyclical effect in this regard as discrimination and the narrative of the 'working class loser' when internalised can lead to depression and drug use is a likely response to this depression. There is a correlation between cannabis use and ESL though this does not imply causality. Truancy or continuous absence is a likely predictor of ESL. The research indicates that a high number of ESLs have been in care (17.9%) and that they may suffer from emotional hunger as a result. Gordon (2017) remarks that the principal focus for the ESL teacher is the creation of a connection with the young person. The research confirms that through the mentorship of an adult, ally boundaries can be crossed into contact zones where social capital can be developed through mutual process with ESLs and in these spaces their access to developmental assets can be expanded. The research indicates that taking action on an issue affecting one's own life can help a young person to take power over it.

ESLs respond well to PYD and PYD can be used in the design of educational programmes designed to overcome marginalisation in ESLs. The research suggests that the three Ds of the D cycle can be successfully challenged by Bowers *et al.*, (2010) five Cs of PYD. The five Cs of PYD are: competence, confidence, connection, caring and character. Competence is the ability to master the other domains. Confidence relates to self-worth and self-efficacy. Connection relates to positive proximal relationships so that family supports, peer groups and school and community groups provide a sense of belonging. Caring means compassion, empathy and concern for others. Character is a moral dimension in which the young person demonstrates a moral code that is suited to membership of their social ecology so that they can determine the difference between right and wrong subject to the accepted social norms. Bowers comments on the relevance of connectedness during adolescence, 'as youth transition to new learning environments, experience new social situations, and autonomy becomes an important developmental goal, many adolescents may begin to doubt their academic and social abilities and, as well, may feel less connected to both parents, peers, and the larger ecological context'

(Bowers *et al.*, 2010, p. 733). The five Cs model is used by PYD practitioners to integrate young people into their social ecologies while promoting traits in them that have a positive effect within the communities, schools, and groups to which these young people belong. The five Cs is a useful model in the design and implementation of PYD programmes and this research indicates that they can be used to disrupt the D Cycle and establish what (Merton, 2004, p. 5) refers to as a virtuous cycle of achievement.

Recommendations

Challenge the Dominant Narrative

ESL teachers should actively fight against the notion that ESLs are the Cinderellas of education. The personal anguish I experienced when I realised that most of the learners I was responsible for in Youthreach would describe themselves as ‘scumbags’ was distressing. Disputation is important to challenge the belief and the resulting behaviour or consequence. When the belief is disputed a new more positive understanding of the situation can emerge, e.g. there are a lot of people in this school that have problems reading and writing some of them have dyslexia or a similar learning difficulty. It doesn’t make them stupid. Seligman (2002) refers to energization as a way of turning the negative belief into a positive, e.g. I am not stupid, I am just not good at reading and writing but I can be a good listener and contribute to class by saying things and making good points and I can work on my reading and writing. Service learning and the principles of YPAR used in the GAISCE and RAP programmes offer the opportunity to challenge this narrative as young people are given the opportunity to contribute positively to their communities. ESL teachers can also actively use disputation to challenge internalised beliefs of ESLs.

PYD as Proactive Health Promotion

A proactive approach to health promotion through outdoor education and PYD should benefit ESLs, as this research has shown. Third level graduates in Outdoor Education are often regarded like ESLs as the Cinderellas of education. The Leaving Cert points required to gain entry into these degree programmes are significantly lower than the points required for entry into a traditional education degree. The cost of outdoor activities can be quite prohibitive for Youthreach centres and might only last for a day. Graduates of Outdoor Education programmes might provide invaluable resources to Youthreach centres as they are qualified in a range of outdoor activities and are also the gatekeepers to a wide range of activities and opportunities not usually available to ESLs. They have the potential to be prosocial nodes for ESLs to connect to; Youthreach centres should actively recruit these types of graduates.

External Links

Greater links with national governing bodies for outdoor sports should be sought out by Youthreach centres. National governing bodies such as Canoeing Ireland, Climbing Ireland, Irish Sailing Association and Cycling Ireland to mention but a few have access to equipment and instructors that can deliver these programmes. In the case where ESL centres have hired Outdoor Education graduates they already have qualified instructors on staff with links to these organisations. Where possible equipment and instructors can be shared and costs of delivering such programmes can be greatly reduced so that while a centre may have an annual day trip to an outdoor activity centre, this might be changed into an eight-week course. This may present timetabling difficulties but during the programme students participation was dependent on their ability to stay up to date with their assignments and this seemed to work well. Regional equipment stores and licensing agreements for equipment should be entered into between Youthreach centre coordinators regionally. An important factor in the funding these organisations receive is outreach to disadvantaged groups which opens up an opportunity that centre coordinators can exploit.

Adventure sports provide opportunities to develop prosocial links as demonstrated in this research. Young people can experience a 'buzz' that they might otherwise seek from illicit substances. They provide an opportunity for young people to find a sense of belonging and connect to prosocial nodes as well as providing an escape that is more socially acceptable and certainly a healthier alternative to substance abuse. ESLs trapped in a cycle of negative psychology experiencing anhedonia might be reinvigorated by the thrill of adventure sports. Young people can experience adversity through adventure sports as part of a team, learn how to deal with setbacks through expedition and become more resilient. Young people can learn essential life skills like risk management, safety procedure and learn that through hard work and dedication anything is possible. Fear is intrinsic to adventure sports, managing and overcoming fear is important to the young people in crisis. Dealing with big emotions and being supported by adult allies and other team members while doing so creates a sense of belonging and fraternity in young people.

Service Learning

Service learning was a feature of YPAR and the RAP project, and the GAISCE programme that was undertaken as part of this research. Service learning improves young people's self-conception of their value and worth and allows them to contribute to their communities. Service learning is a way of integrating

learning with community work so that young people can see themselves as contributing to their communities. Scales (2011) comments on the importance of service learning, 'if a programme succeeds in raising youth assets, it is, by definition of the asset framework, having an impact beyond youth themselves: Asset scores for youth in a given programme are not likely to increase absent an impact on the broader ecology of young people's families, schools, peers, and communities'. Young people who feel that they can exercise a positive influence over their communities, raise the level of developmental assets in their community are becoming pro social nodes themselves.

Conclusion

It is well recognised in the literature, as discussed above, that ESLs need greater emotional support from their teachers than their counterparts in the mainstream, though there is no specific training for Youthreach staff in how to provide this. The internalisation of negative stereotypes has a demoralising effect on ESLs, challenging this dismal internalised narrative requires a catharsis, an experience from which a new truth emerges and the ESLs self-perception undergoes a paradigm shift to a more positive self-perception. Positive health promotion and positive self-perceptions for learners should be key values in Youthreach centres. External links provide scope for ESLs to engage in developmental activities and build positive purpose led relationships within their communities. Service learning provides an opportunity for young people to see themselves as contributors to society, this is important to alienated youth as it allows them to form connections and develop a sense of purpose and belonging. For some ESLs trapped in a dismal cycle of negative psychology, a clinical therapeutic approach might be necessary to break the cycle.

Young people who attend second chance education institutions like Youthreach are under the false perception on entry into Youthreach centres that they are 'scumbags and knackers'. They can present with challenging behaviour and a range of learning difficulties. The role of teacher in a Youthreach centre is a difficult one, however, if we can challenge this false perception so that by the time a young person completes the Youthreach programme they have changed this dismal self-concept, then their time in the centre will have been a success.

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