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Academic resilience: a transcultural perspective

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Abstract

Resilience, defined as the ability to overcome the difficulties encountered in achieving personal, professional or academic goals, is a topic of recent interest within the field of social sciences; more specifically in Psychology and Positive Psychopedagogy.

From the transcultural study of Grotberg in 1999, held in twenty places distributed in twenty countries, to transcultural research conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in its TIMSS 2011 study, knowledge about children resilience has been incorporating relevant data and factors related to both students and its context in the exploratory phase, which is this line of research.

Transcultural research about resilience have also been responsible for changing the preventive institutional approach to promotion models, committed to optimizing strengths and resilience factors of subjects at risk.

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1. Antecedents

Since the early seventies of the twentieth century, it has been developed a huge line of research about individuals that are able to develop skills despite having been raised in adverse conditions. The essential characteristic of these studies is the interest in a competence called resilience (Coronado-Hijón & Paneque, 2015).

Resilience research was originated within the field of child psychology, in the middle of the decade of 1970's, towards children living in contexts which development conditions were extremely adverse.

The term resilience began to be used from the developmental psychology field in order to explain how some children were able and competent to overcome adversities and developed as healthy people with positive adaptation

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profiles. From this research scope it shifted quickly to applied fields of Psychology and Positive Psychopedagogy focusing on learning skills of resilience as a new paradigm facing the approach of vulnerability and risk, as it prioritizes focus on strengths, rather than the deficit or difficulty (Coronado-Hijón, 2016).

Rutter (1979) was one of the first researchers who felt uncomfortable with that trend or incomplete approach of studies which only focused on the negative development outcomes. In 1979, it was noted the importance of knowing the factors that act as protectors of situations of adversity, but knowledge of the protective mechanisms of this resilient dynamics was also considered even more important.

On her behalf, Werner (1989) emphasizes the importance of resilience from the possibilities that its knowledge can produce in order to design interventions which main objective is the optimization of personal balance between vulnerability and resilience. In this way the author, rather than reducing exposure to risk, exhort to increase or strengthen protective factors such as personal supporting and affection sources, interpersonal communication and problem solving skills.

In the initial stages of theoretical evolution of the construct of resilience the interest was focused on the individual factors that acted as protectors against risk and vulnerability. In a second stage studies took more interest in the role of contextual interaction dynamics with individuals and their situational environment. This evolution illuminates a transactional ecological perspective of resilience (Morelato, 2011), where the interest is no longer in factors but in the dynamic mechanisms and the notion of both risk and protective factor acquires an ambiguous and changing nature depending on the context configuration. Since this approach, resilience is considered as a dynamic, bidirectional and transactional developmental process (Coronado-Hijón & Paneque, 2015).

The forefathers of this dynamic notion of resilience were Michael Rutter (1993) and Edith Grotberg (1995).

Michael Rutter (1993) coined the term protective mechanisms within a dynamic model where the individual has an active role and reacts to the environment and where resilient capacity is known as a global and transactional response that allows individuals to emerge stronger from adversity.

According to Edith Grotberg (1995) resilience is a result of the interaction between resilient factors belonging to three different levels: social support (I have), skills (I can) and inner strength (I am).

This extension of the construct understood as a process enhances the field of educational psychology and educational intervention for the development of resilient competence.

From the definition of resilience as "the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened or transformed by experiences of adversity," by Edith Grotberg (1995), it has been making further refinements and contextualization. Regarding to the contextualization of resilience within the specific area of learning, we understand academic resilience as the ability to bounce back and successfully overcome the risk factors of learning difficulties.

The following analysis will focus on the most important cultural studies in this area, as well as outstanding proposals and educational intervention programs.

2. Evidence Sources

A milestone in the field of children resilience researching is the longitudinal study of Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1982). In this longitudinal study 698 children born in 1955 in unfavorable conditions on the island of Kauai (Hawaii) were analyzed. From the original amount, 201 children who were at the age of two years old, had a large number of biological and psychosocial indicators of risk. Despite this, 72 individuals were able to overcome adversity and developed themselves as socially competent adults. These 72 subjects were named the "resilient".

The International Resilience Project conducted by Edith Grotberg (1999), was a transcultural study which took place in twenty places distributed in twenty countries. According to the results, the author identified the role of human development in the ability to be resilient, understood as a dynamic and interrelated process. She also identified resilient factors and organized them into four categories of strengths: internal developed (I am), external support received (I have) and social and conflict resolution abilities acquired (I can).

Cultural differences observed in the international project of resilience indicated that all countries have a common set of resilient factors in order to promote the resilience of their children. Among the cultural differences observed they emphasized the followings: the strategy parental socialization scale according to the control or autonomy that children were given, the relationship between punishment type and its justifications, the age at which children are supposed to solve their own problems, the amount of support and love that children receive under adversity conditions.

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