Students' dreams for the future and perspectives on resilience-building aspects of their lives: The view from East Greenland

Mia Glendøs[1]

Aarhus University, Department of Educational Psychology, Tuborgvej 164, 2400 Copenhagen, NV, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how perspectives from students can increase knowledge of how teachers and school authority can support students in building up resilience as a response to social challenges in the community. A locally flexible methodology using structured drawings (including classroom observation), semi-structured interviews, and semantic coding and situated analyses in a case study in East Greenland provided the following results: The students' aspirations were mostly about getting an education and a job and becoming socially successful. The students' motivation for attending school and doing educational assignments often depended on the social interaction with their teachers, and the students requested more involvement in decision-making processes at school to create more meaningful educational practices. If schools are to support the processes of building resilience and motivation for education, schools should include students' perspectives and encourage students' agency by listening to what they have to say.

1. Introduction

Researchers have advocated for authorities to pay more attention to the perspectives of children and youth in Greenland (Christensen, 2013; Meeqqat Inuusuttullu Pillugit Ilisimasaqarfik [MIPI], 2011; Olesen, Holm, & Hammeken-Holm, 2013; Pedersen, 2006; Pedersen & Bjerregaard, 2013). Research on youth voices in native communities emphasizes the value, power, and importance of including young people's own perspectives in programs intended to improve youth's lives (Caringi, Klika, Zimmerman, Trautman, & van den Pol, 2013; Checkoway, 2011; Head, 2011; Richards-Schuster & Pritzker, 2015). In East Greenland, students are usually identified as neglected children in families with alcohol abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and low-income housing (Bjerregaard & Larsen, 2015; Dahl-Petersen, Larsen, Nielsen, Jørgensen, & Bjerregaard, 2016; Lind, 2011). One school reckoned that 236 of the total of 446 students face significant challenges regarding their well-being and struggle with school functioning (Lynge, 2016). In 2012, this school initiated a program called Social Problems in the Town, and I became a part of this program, conducting a study that included students' perspectives on the resilience-building aspects of their lives. Resilience is in this aspect not understood as the building of individual traits or factors but as a reciprocal process between the individual and the social ecology (Masten, 2015; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Ungar, 2012). The study furthermore incorporated an exploration of how this knowledge could be adapted to create supportive teaching environments at the school.

Theories of resilience and community psychology were used to conduct the study, which incorporated inquiry into the life of the children and youth and supportive intervention regarding protective factors in their lives based in the following research question: What are the students' perspectives of protective factors in their lives, and how can teachers use this knowledge to support the students' process of building resilience? The aim of the research intervention was to consider and acknowledge the students and their ways of building up resilience, by acknowledging the students' perspectives and agency. The study itself thus focused less on the students' vulnerability and more on their strengths and the opportunities for building resilience and a supportive environment in the local school community. In order to meet the ethical challenges of doing research and intervention in societies that differ from those of the researchers, a collaborative approach with the teachers of the school was attempted, parental approval before interviewing the students was obtained, and the methodological approach and research focus were carefully chosen.

In this article, I present the results of the study with the East Greenlandic students and discuss how the results relate to processes for building resilience. However, first, I define the concept of resilience and my understanding of resilience building. Second, I outline how the concept of resilience was incorporated in the study method and briefly present the design, sample, content, and analysis. Third, I present the results regarding the East Greenlandic students' hopes and dreams for their future and their positive experiences and discuss these and other

E-mail address: mg@edu.au.dk.
[1] Present/permanent address: Guldbergsgade 115, 2.tv., 2200 Copenhagen N. Denmark.

results regarding the students' perspectives on the current situation at the school, their difficulties in life, and their supportive social networks. Fourth, I suggest how the students' perspectives could be used to build up their resilience.

1.1. Resilience

The phenomenon of resilience has gained increasing currency in psychology research as a way of identifying factors that allow some people to recover from traumatic experiences or adversity in life (Almedom & Glandon, 2007; Bell, Romano, & Flynn, 2013; Benard, 2007; Gergen, 2000; Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Philips,- & Williamson, 2011; Prince-Embury, 2013; Rapp & Wintersteen, 1989; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). There is no universal definition of the concept of resilience (Aburn, Gott, & Hoare, 2016); however, the previous understanding of resilience as a one-dimensional attribute that an individual either has or does not have is no longer accepted in research (Caringi et al., 2013; Folke et al., 2002; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Ungar, 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Instead, resilience is seen as a series of dynamic adaptive systems that are interconnected and changeable regarding an individual's life circumstances (Alvord- & Grados, 2005; Benard, 2007; Bottrell & Armstrong, 2012; Gu & Day, 2007; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Sommer, 2011; Ungar, 2012; Werner, 1993). Resilience can be fostered, maintained, or hindered in relation to life opportunities (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benard, 1993; Caringi et al., 2013; Folke et al., 2002; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Stewart & Wang, 2012; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012). It can be learned or built.

Resilience comprises the concepts of risk and of positive adaptation; thus, resilience is difficult to fully measure but is indirectly derived from these underlying concepts (Luthar et al., 2000; Sommer, 2011). Risk is linked to vulnerability and factors that protect individuals when they are exposed to risk. Positive adaptation is related to protective factors, such as proximal attachment, self-efficacy (Bandura's definition as one's social-related assessment of competence to perform specific tasks), self-esteem, neuroplasticity, social competence, sense of cohesion (Antonovsky's concept), navigations skills, and problem-solving skills, as well as to opportunities in the social ecologies around the individual, the societal structure, the context, and the cultures (Antonovsky, 1993; Bandura, 2012; Sommer, 2011; Ungar, 2012; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The key aim of resilience-based intervention is to develop assets and resources supporting those exposed to risk (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). In this study, the focus was the social and relational aspects of protective factors.

In order to support resilience building among children, schools have been emphasized as encompassing various possibilities and risks (Benard, 1993; Henderson, 2012; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Kirmayer et al., 2011; McAllister & McKinnon, 2009; Noam & Hermann, 2002; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; Wattar, Fanous, & Berliner, 2012). Researchers have shown that all stakeholders in the school community need to have a better understanding of protective factors as they are a crucial component of resilience (Henderson, 2012). If such methods are adopted, students are more likely to perform well academically, succeed in life (Henderson), and overcome stressful life circumstances. Protective factors that successfully help children and youth adapt and cope with the difficult situations they face must always be viewed in the context of the children's cultures. In this study, I explore students' perspectives on different aspects of their lives associated with protective factors especially related to the social ecology in the school and community.

2. Method and study aim

The East Greenlandic students were invited to describe their dreams for the future, good life experiences, opinions about the school, difficulties in life, and supportive social networks. These five areas were

related to *aspects of life*, incorporating protective factors for building resilience. These five factors were used as a structured template for the inquiry as they seem to incorporate a communicational opening for the students to talk about different elements of their lives. The first area is related to the literature on resilience that encompasses highly positive expectations regarding one's future capabilities and opportunities as an important factor in building resilience (Bottrell & Armstrong, 2012; Gu & Day, 2007; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012; White, 2008; Wyman, Cowen, Work, & Kerley, 1993). The second area is related to experiences of security and happiness, which can pave the way for turning points that challenge feelings of insecurity and discouragement (Sommer, 2011). Feelings of security and capability for success are regarded as some of the key factors of strong resilience (Benard, 2007; Gergen, 2000; Prince-Embury, 2013; Zolkoski &- Bullock, 2012).

The third area is based on resilience research, which emphasizes the importance of school for building resilience (Benard, 1993; Henderson, 2012; Noam & Hermann, 2002). The fourth area is related to difficulties in life and focuses on life difficulties identified by the students themselves, as life difficulties are dependent on local contexts and situations (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). The fifth area includes supportive social networks as such networks and relationships are a vital component of resilience (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Prince-Embury, 2013; Sommer, 2011; Ungar, 2012; Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013).

The inquiry into the students' perspectives was based in a community psychology project, with the teachers and the leadership of a local school in East Greenland. The direction of the study was made in collaboration with the school leadership and the design made flexible to fit the local circumstances of the teachers and the school structures, and the inquiry of the students' perspective. I designed most of the analyses. The analyses of the students' perspectives were presented to the teachers and the school leadership at all the schools in the area. The teachers and the school leadership used the analyses to discuss how they could include the students' perspectives in their educational and pedagogical work practice.

2.1. Design and sample

The participating students were aged 9 to 15 years and were chosen because of their teachers' collaborative engagement in the research, their parents' permission to participate, and what was practically possible during the period. The sample was not particularly vulnerable students but a randomly collected sample of students at the school. They engaged in different inquiry approaches; 41 students participated in an inquiry using structured drawings in social research settings in the classrooms in which the students had the opportunity to interact with each other during the session, 7 participated in individual semi-structured interviews, and 8 participated in a focus group interview. Throughout the article, the identity of each participating student is kept anonymous, and the results are presented according to the themes of the five aspects of life.

2.1.1. Structured drawings and the process observation

The methodology, application, and analysis of the structured drawings are described in detail in the article "X" (Author, accepted). Briefly, 41 students from one third-grade class and two eighth-grade classes were invited to fill out a template constructed with open thematic questions concerning different aspects of their lives. The template was shaped in the form of a polar bear and included areas for four of the five aspects of life. The drawing process, which also included writing and verbalizing, took one or two lessons in each class, and the students were free to choose their level of communication and the level of collaboration with each other during the process. Methodologies for using drawings in research with children emphasize the need to observe the drawing process in order to understand the creator's intentions (Cox, 2005; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Malchiodi, 1998); classroom