Research into Resilience

Christof Wiechert

Disturbing reports are circulating around the world, always in the murky twilight of so-called "facts." According to the rumors, or indeed facts, that we are dealing with, a disproportionate number of war veterans are committing suicide on their return to the USA from their tour in Iraq. After the Vietnam War, accounts came in from various sides of soldiers who were able to reenter everyday civilian life only with great effort. People in Europe are also worried about the NATO soldiers' ability to deal with trauma after they have been deployed on peace-keeping missions abroad.

The question is, how does an individual cope with traumatic or otherwise shattering events in his or her life? This question is just as valid for children as for adults.

Research into these questions is essentially the study of *resilience*: overcoming, processing "insurmountable" experiences, drawing upon the soul's (mental) power of resistance (*resilire* = to spring back, to rebound). This research arose after World War II when people were faced with the fact that there were those who inwardly overcame their experiences of war or prison and were able to resume a "normal" life once their soul wounds had healed. However, at the same time, there were those who never really overcame these experiences and kept suffering from the trauma of war.

The question arose: On what does this ability to inwardly overcome experiences depend? What makes one child strong in taking life's knocks, what makes another child react so much more sensitively? From regions where people have been hit by great natural disasters—by contrast with war zones—we hear relatively little about the lasting trauma they endured and how inwardly they have, or have not, come to terms with them.

Research into resilience has arrived at several conclusions that have considerable significance for educators in particular. The first issue is whether the soul's power of resistance may be explained by heredity. If the parents have inner strength, is it passed on to their offspring? According to numerous studies this is not the case. Resilience is not inherited.

However, resilience is definitely connected with experiences during the early years of childhood. One researcher thinks it is a matter of the first four or five years while another thinks the whole time of childhood is significant, that is, until the tenth year. Leaving aside these different viewpoints of timing, there is agreement that the soul's power of resistance, or resilience, is nurtured and developed if children have had the following five experiences:

1. A Reliable, Stable Relationship with One Person

This person does not necessarily need to be the mother, but it is necessary for it to be a single person in the beginning. Later on this person may be joined by others. Neurologists also point out that at the start of life there must be only one person to relate to. Later on a second, followed by a third or fourth person may be added to the child's circle of relationships—just not in the beginning.

2. An Authoritative Upbringing

This means that the child requires the fundamental experience that others (involved in its upbringing) decide for him/her and that he/she is completely relieved of the need to make decisions. Simply from the experience that others make the

right decisions the child gains a sense of security in life—in other words, trust. This experience cannot be overestimated. Inwardly the child knows, "To begin with, others decide what is good or bad for me, what is right and wrong, healthy and unhealthy." A deep sense of security arises from the feeling: "I can leave it up to the world to take over; I can rely upon my surroundings in all circumstances."

3. Learning through Example

This has two aspects. On one hand, a moral quality makes a deep impression: What children experience through the behavior of those around them should be completely compatible with what is demanded of them. If children are forbidden to watch television and the people they relate to watch unlimited amounts of television, the children's understanding of their surroundings as a totality cracks open. One can add many other examples.

On the other hand, there is something else at stake too. When the Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura discovered the so-called mirror neurons and their activity in the human brain, the interesting question arose whether, generally speaking, children learn primarily with their intellect or from imitation, from "doing it like this." Bandura argued vehemently that the young child learns from imitating, not through cognition, something he documents impressively through the process of learning to speak.

To date, in the practice of teaching, the idea that children up to the age of ten learn in a more carefree way through imitation than through ceaselessly drumming things into their heads is scarcely to be found. Through the process of learning arithmetic, for example, by developing habits rather than exercising the intellect, the child develops self-confidence as he/she learns "externally." He/she feels affirmed through the certainty of habit. The research described here—which is derived not from an anthroposophical-anthropological milieu, but from conventional experiment—endorses the statement by Rudolf Steiner that from around the twelfth year intellectual or cognitive learning takes on more and more significance. Only with Steiner this change in approach to learning is called "becoming capable of forming judgments." In other words, the learning process is increasingly guided and determined by the child's own powers of discrimination, no longer by habit.

4. A Qualitative Approach to Time

What is the difference between the morning and the evening for our feeling about life? What is the difference between autumn and spring, summer and winter for our feeling about life? Within a Christian context, how does the Easter festival differ from Christmas? Or within an Islamic context, how, for example, does the sugar festival differ from the beginning of Ramadan? How does the child experience the ordering of time, how do we help it to experience the ordering of time? Here is one quite simple example: When I was still quite young, people in Holland celebrated the Queen's birthday at the end of spring. This was the season when we used to visit the annual fair and to celebrate the day we would be given cotton candy on a wooden stick. In our minds as children, this cotton candy developed into the quintessence of the celebration of the Queen's birthday. Many biographies describe rituals linked to the seasons. There is also the simple fact of going to bed. Is it a random activity because we are tired, or is there a small ritual belonging to this moment (when we take our leave of the day) that is entirely different from waking up in the morning?

We can see from the way time is treated in Waldorf kindergartens and schools that these festivals are not celebrated merely for their own sake, but rather out of some developmental insight. Whoever wants to give shape to his or her life, whoever refuses simply to be "lived" by events, has to shape time.

5. A Surplus of Positive School Experiences

This basis for resilience scarcely requires an

explanation. Nonetheless, it ought to be pointed out that still today insufficient attention is paid to the lingering effects of negative experiences suffered during the early years of schooling. Many educational traumas can accompany an individual life-long, wounds of which the school (or the teachers) are often not aware. In other words, whatever basis is laid down for the mood of soul at school plays a key role in the lives of children well into their adult years; it is an important reason for schools and teachers to ask themselves how the pupils are faring. This is by no means to deny that school is a place where pupils need to go through crises. What is at stake is the overcoming of difficulties and whether pupils feel sufficiently accepted by their teachers.

We will have no difficulty, after reading the above account, in recognizing the basic requirements of education; they need to be based on helping the child develop resilience. We are dealing here with only one aspect, however, of resilience. Another aspect concerns the so-called education arising from the experience of emergencies. How do we help children who have survived natural disasters or war disasters? Nowadays, we know that what enables children to work through trauma more than anything else is art or artistic activity. The hygienic effect of artistic practice has been documented in many places and confirms the healing power that can come from art. *Art needs to become a fully integrated element of every form of education.*

References

Rutter, M. "Resilience Reconsidered," *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Steiner, R. *Die Paedagogische Praxis vom Gesichtspunkte der geisteswissenschaftlichen Menschen erkenntnis* (GA 306), 5th Lecture, Dornach, 19th April 1923.

Werner, E. "Protective Factors and Individual Resilience," *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Christof Wiechert *was a Waldorf teacher in the Netherlands and has served as Leader of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland.*