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# A Resilience Curriculum for Early Years and Primary Schools in Europe: Enhancing Quality Education

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## Abstract

*About twenty percent of school children experience social, emotional and behaviour problems during the course of any given year and may need the use of mental health services. The number may rise to up to fifty percent amongst children coming from socio-economically disadvantaged areas and from vulnerable communities. The economic crisis which Europe is undergoing at the moment has exacerbated the risks among those already facing disadvantages such as unemployment of young people and new families, increasing poverty and social disadvantage for the whole communities and regions. These challenges underline the need to equip children from an early age with the requisite skills to help them overcome the challenges and obstacles they are set to face in such circumstances while providing healthy and protective contexts which promote their health and well-being. This paper describes the development of a resilience curriculum for children in early years and primary schools in Europe with the aim of enhancing quality education for all children, including the most vulnerable ones. It presents and discusses the curriculum framework developed from the existing literature, including the key principles, processes and themes underlying the curriculum.*

**Key words:** curriculum; early years; primary schools; quality education resilience.

## Introduction

The third Strategic Objective of the EU Council's 'Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training for 2020' (European Commission, 2009) underlines the need for quality education and support for vulnerable groups, including those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, Roma children, migrants and children with special educational needs. Such children may be at risk of early school leaving, absenteeism, school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems. For instance, the average rate of early school leaving amongst young people with a migrant origin is double that of native youth while the rate is even higher for Roma populations, who are among the most socially excluded members of society: "Such groups tend to suffer from weaker family support from their families, face discrimination within the education system, and have more limited access to non-formal and in-formal learning opportunities outside compulsory schooling" (European Commission, 2011a). The *Commission Communication on early childhood education and care* (European Commission, 2011b) recommends ensuring and increasing access to good quality early childhood education and care as one of the most effective measures to provide children with a good start in education and to build their resilience and prevent early school leaving. This is particularly relevant in the light of the economic crisis the EU is undergoing at the moment, which may exacerbate the risks of those already facing disadvantage such as unemployment of young people and new families, increasing poverty and social disadvantages for entire communities and regions. The current 20% of children living in poverty in Europe is set to increase as a result of the present economic crisis, with increasing unemployment, taxation and cuts in social benefits leading to further economic hardship, poverty and inequality. *The Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools* (European Commission, 2008) underlines that Europe's growth and prosperity depends on the active participation by all children and young people, while the *Europe 2020* strategy (European Commission, 2010) identifies inclusive growth as one of the key drivers for growth.

## A Resilience Perspective in Education

The development of a resilience curriculum in early and primary education in Europe is a direct response to the above objectives and the current social and economic situation in Europe. The curriculum seeks to promote the academic, emotional and social learning of children who may be at risk of early school leaving, absenteeism, school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems amongst others, by providing them with the key tools to overcome the disadvantages and obstacles in their development whilst making use of their strengths. Equipping children with the requisite skills to overcome challenges related to poverty, unemployment, discrimination and social exclusion as well as mobility, urbanization, weakening of social connectedness, competitiveness, excessive consumerism, violence, bullying, and

family stress, would be a very good investment in building a generation of European resilient citizens for the coming years.

The resilience perspective has been particularly focused on identifying the processes which children and young people need to grow and thrive, even in the face of risk and disadvantage, and to overcome the challenges and adversities they face in their development. Resilience is a quality which can be nurtured and developed from a very young age, and the systems impinging on the child's life, such as school, have a crucial and determining role in directing the child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development towards healthy trajectories even in the face of risk (Benard, 2004; Masten, 2001). Through the study of children who managed to thrive and succeed in the various facets of their development despite the negative circumstances in their lives, the resilience perspective has led to a reconsideration of the ways in which we can foster success and healthy development in children. It suggests that we may be more effective in supporting children's development and well-being by focusing on their strengths rather than on their weaknesses.

Resilience may be defined as successful adaptation in the face of adversity and environmental stressors, such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and family instability and breakdown (Masten, 1994). Successful adaptation may include the presence of positive academic and social behaviour, absence of undesirable behaviour, good external and internal adaptation, and functioning in normal range. Rather than an extraordinary process, it is "more about ordinary responses which focus on strengths" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). It is context-specific and involves developmental change, rather than a trait that a child is born with or automatically keeps once achieved (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). In contrast to the invulnerability perspective of earlier research, which focused on individual characteristics such as stress resistance as the determinant of resilience, later studies revealed that resilience is a quality which can be nurtured and developed from a very young age, and the systems impinging on the child's life, such as the family, peer group and school, have a crucial and determining role in directing the children's development towards healthy trajectories even in the face of risk (Benard, 2004; Dent & Cameron, 2003; Pianta & Walsh 1998). Development is the result of the dynamic interactions between the various systems impinging on the child's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), and it is the interaction between the child and his or her environment that finally determines the adaptive process. The classic studies on disadvantaged children and communities by Werner and Smith (1992), and Rutter (1998) amongst others, found that despite the high-risk environments in which their participants grew up, the majority developed into healthy, successful young adults. They reported that protective factors had a stronger impact on children's development than the risk factors.

## **Resilience Education Paradigm**

Schools are ideal places to build social and emotional competences such as resilience skills for all children and this is so much more important for vulnerable children

(Goleman, 1995). Helping children to understand their and others' emotions, increase empathy, and develop self-regulation strategies to manage negative emotions, such as anger and stress, are all significant competences which schools need to include in their curriculum and teach them systematically to all students (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2009; Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg, Haynes, Kessler, Schwab-Stone, & Shriver, 1997). In seeking to build a resilience curriculum for early and primary schools in Europe, a framework was developed underpinning the key principles informing the curriculum and the processes set to lead from a state of being to a process of becoming (Figure 1).

Resilience education ("paideia", Matsopoulos, 2011) is proposed as a core competence in the early and primary school curriculum and taught on a regular basis by the classroom teachers. It is integrated in the mainstream curriculum rather than a bolt-on, added activity delivered by outside experts; the latter has been found to be largely ineffective in the long term (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). In their review of evaluations of the SEAL programme in the UK, Cooper and Jacobs (2011) attribute the programme's lack of success to it not being embedded directly in the formal curriculum and the teaching staff not involved in its delivery and reinforcement. Hoagwood, Olin, Kerker, Kratochwill, Crowe, & Saka (2007) reported that ecological and collaborative approaches, which included the classroom teachers amongst others, were the most effective in the promotion of children's social and emotional learning and well-being. The resilience curriculum framework is thus presented as a universal intervention programme targeting all children in the classroom, but with activities reflecting the diversity of learners, particularly vulnerable children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds such as Roma children, migrant children, children living in poverty, and children with special educational needs. Such children are more likely to experience amongst others, weaker family support, prejudice and discrimination, limited learning opportunities and access to health care, negative life events, and bullying, exclusion and isolation (EC 2012; Simões, Matos, Tome, Ferreira, & Diniz, 2009; UNICEF 2005). A resilience curriculum targeting the needs and strengths of such groups, will focus on promoting educational equality, resilience assets for positive development and active citizenship of such children by fostering their internal resources such as self-awareness, problem solving, optimism, adaptability, perseverance, belief in inner strength, positive attitudes, optimism, self-efficacy, sense of coherence and purpose, high academic expectation, empathy and collaboration, as well as their external resources such as caring relationships and meaningful participation at home, at school and in their peer group (Benard, 2004; Cefai, 2008; Dimakos & Papakonstantinopolou, 2012; Forde, 2007; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; King, 2004; Matsopoulos, 2011; McEwen, 2007; Simões et al., 2009).

The curriculum will thus operate as a universal, inclusive curriculum for all children in the classroom, including the vulnerable ones (Cefai, 2008). It will take a developmental, inclusive and spiral approach across the early and primary school years, and will be

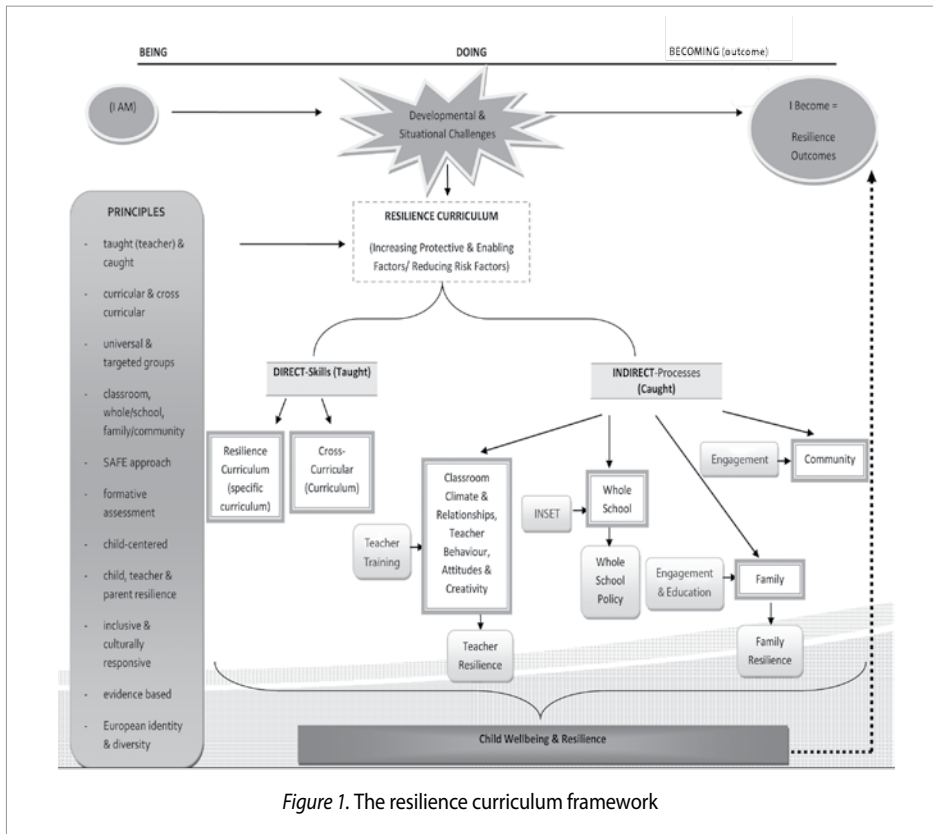


Figure 1. The resilience curriculum framework

based on a European perspective, reflecting the strengths and needs of European society. It will be responsive to the needs of the individual learner differences, underlining the right of all learners for a quality resilience education, and a commitment towards social justice with the awareness of the risks of discriminatory practices due to individual educational needs, minority statuses, and poverty, amongst others. While based on a European identity, it will thus also reflect European diversity, with activities addressing cultural differences across Europe. It will also be evidence based, making use of strategies which have been found to be effective in resilience enhancement. It will search for state-of-the-art service arrangements reflecting the EU agenda for excellence and competitiveness at the global level. At the same time, it will be flexible and reflexive, seeking to achieve the enhancement of ethical standards through reflective practice.

The curriculum will be both “taught” and “caught”. The taught component will include explicit and regular teaching of resilience education as a core competence by the classroom teacher, making use of direct teaching of evidence-based and developmentally and culturally appropriate resilience competences with the application to real-life situations. This necessitates a set curriculum and available resources to support consistency of delivery, one of the key criteria of programme effectiveness (Durlak,

Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2008). It will follow the SAFE approach, that is, it is sequenced, active, focused and explicit. Research on the effectiveness of resilience and social-emotional learning programmes provides consistent evidence that effective programmes adopt sequenced step-by-step approach, make use of experiential and participative learning, focus on skills development and have explicit learning goals (Durlak et al., 2011; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). Assessment will be formative, underlining areas for further development, with both the teacher and the students involved in the process. The curriculum will take a spiral approach, building from one year to the other as children move from the early years to the early primary years, and then to the junior primary years. This involves a similar process to that of other academic skills, with increasing complexity of behaviour and social contexts requiring particular skills at each developmental level (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). A developmental approach strengthens and builds on basic skills from one year to the next, building on what pupils have already learned, and equipping them with skills needed for different stages in their development. There will be three manuals for teachers for each of these three key stages as well as corresponding manuals for parents. The curriculum will additionally be infused in other academic subjects of the curriculum in a structured way, while there will also be home activities to reinforce the skills being learnt at school. Infusing the resilience competences in the other academic content of the curriculum will enable the generalization and internalization of those competences (cf. Diekstra 2008; Elias, 2003; Elias & Synder, 2008).

The curriculum also makes provision for the resilience skills to be ‘caught’ through the classroom and whole school contexts. The “caught” component of the model focuses on the ecology of the classroom and the school as a whole as well as focusing on administrators and their leadership style, and systemic variables of the school district such as a prevention philosophy in dealing with behaviour problems in the schools. The “taught” component aims to bring multiple changes in the whole school culture, and changing the way teachers and administrators think about resilience, well-being and mental health, helping them also to focus on students’ mental health, well-being and resilience in the face of adversity in both the academic and social domains (Johnson, 2008). The teaching of resilience skills by the classroom teacher at both curricular (specific resilience curriculum) and cross-curricular levels will also impact teachers’ overall practice and lead to a paradigm shift in teaching and learning in the classroom with resilience education embedded in the whole classroom climate (cf. Mental Health Foundation in Australia, 2005). The classroom relationships, pedagogy, activities, resources and management, will thus provide a context where pupils can practice and apply the skills learned both in the classroom and outside, such as in the playground. For instance, authentic relationships built on a daily basis with all pupils with the teacher’s initiative, characterized by a warm affect and genuine interest for the learning and well-being of the pupils, serve as a compensating mechanism to the stressors experienced by the children (Luthar, 2006).

A whole-school approach where the school community, together with parents and the local community, engages in resilience building in all aspects of school life and where the skills addressed in the classroom, are promoted and reinforced at the whole-school level in a structured and complementary way, will help to create a supportive whole-school context and ethos conducive to more effective resilience outcomes (Cefai & Cavioni, 2013; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weare & Nind, 2011). The programme also includes a parents' manual for all three levels (early years, early primary, late primary) to reinforce the skills learnt at school, and encourage parents to adopt the resilience philosophy in parenting their child. A whole school approach will also target the school staff's and parents' own well-being and resilience. Student resilience is symbiotic with the teachers' own resilience, as tired and burnt-out teachers are unlikely to be in a position to foster students' resilience. School staff thus needs to take active steps to maintain their own health, well-being and resilience in their efforts to promote students' resilience (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Similarly, empowering parents and communities not only to engage collaboratively with the school, but to address their own well-being and resilience, is another important component in a whole school approach to resilience building (Downey & Williams, 2010; Weare & Nind, 2011). The focus is thus on the whole school community operating as a resilient community, with each system connecting to, and supporting, the others (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

## The Curriculum Themes

The curriculum consists of six major themes spiralling from one year to the other at higher levels of complexity as students move from the early years to the early primary years, and then the junior primary years. The six themes have been identified following a review of the resilience literature and a needs analysis of the current socio-economic, educational, and cultural needs of children and young people in the European countries involved in the project.

***Developing a Growth Mindset.*** Developing a growth mindset is essential not only to manage challenges successfully but also to turn them into opportunities for growth and development (Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, & Seligman, 2007; Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004). The activities within this theme draw from positive psychology which values positive subjective experience towards the past, present and future, and seeks to build positive qualities to prevent and deal effectively with psychological problems (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This theme focuses on both cognitive processes such as optimistic thinking, positive self-talk and the disputation of negative thoughts, as well as emotional processes such as the awareness, expression and regulation of positive emotions.

The first sub-theme on the development of positive and optimistic thinking, particularly during setbacks, provides children with opportunities to engage in optimistic thinking, to reflect on and challenge unhelpful thoughts, and consequently



to overcome challenges with a positive attitude (Noble & McGrath, 2008; Seligman, 2002). The first set of activities introduces positive and negative thinking. While younger children may be taught the skill by referring to upside and downside thoughts, older children are then introduced to explanatory styles. Helping children attribute bad events to external, unstable and specific causes is one way of helping them to develop a more positive mindset (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). In the second set, the goal is to see how thoughts, feelings and actions are related to each other, and in the later years how an adversity can be followed by beliefs and their consequences, that is, the feelings and actions that come about from thinking in a particular way. In the last set of activities, children develop ways to challenge these negative beliefs, such as by providing counter-evidence against a negative thought, asking friends what they would do so as to develop alternative ways of thinking, and listing the best, worst and most realistic case scenarios. In the end, children can also rearrange their Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences (ABC) flowcharts to add Disputation (disputing the negative beliefs) and Energization (writing down the feeling after changing the belief) (Seligman, 1998).

The second sub-theme, *Hope, Happiness and Humour*, gives children the opportunity to become aware of, identify and regulate positive emotions, focusing on these three 'Hs'. Positive emotions broaden children's awareness, build their personal and social resources, and buffer against psychological problems (Fredrickson, 2001). The first set of activities focuses on hope as a cognitive process in which persons actively pursue their goals. The activities are built on hope as a process by which individuals engage in pathways thinking, that is the ability to set goals and develop routes to reach them, and agency thinking, the motivation and belief that one can reach these goals (Snyder, 1994). In the happiness activities, children are supported to further explore happiness and what makes them happy. The children also explore ways how they can turn a bad mood into a good one. In the last set of activities, they get a chance to laugh but also to use humour in positive ways, such as the positive appraisal of stressful experience and life events (Peterson et al., 2007).

***Building on Strengths.*** Building on strengths rather than just seeking to address deficit and disadvantage, is a strategic element in promoting favourable mental-health outcomes and resilience in children. The need to develop strengths and resilience have become more pronounced in Europe in the last decades, particularly amongst certain socio-economic and cultural groups, in the face of increasing stresses and disadvantage (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). This theme focuses on two areas, namely building a positive self-concept and self-esteem, and using strengths in academic and social engagement. In the first subtheme, activities focus on helping children to develop a positive self-concept, namely a positive view of their nature, unique qualities and behaviour (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2012). Self-concept applies to a variety of domains, namely social, competence, affect (awareness of emotional states), physical (feelings about looks, health, physical condition, and overall appearance), academic,



and family (Bracken, 1992). Historically, self-esteem (how much one values oneself) has been seen as one of three parts of self-concept, the others being self-image (how you see yourself) and ideal self (how you wish you could be). The level and congruence of self-concept and self-esteem are particularly related to well-being and resilience. Respect for oneself is of benefit in itself, but it must also be congruent, that is, aligned to reality. The activities focus on understanding who I am, becoming aware, and being proud, of my strengths, and understanding how the past and present are part of who I am, while identifying my dreams for the future.

Positive and realistic (congruent) self-concepts in students, especially if these are reinforced by teachers, can be expected to impact on academic and social engagement, and thereby on school achievement. As Purkey (1970) pointed out as early as in 1970, attention should be paid to self-concept (rather than just ability or talent) as an important factor in academic success, namely how teachers and schools can enhance positive and congruent self-concepts in students in seeking to engage them in the learning process. The activities focus also on social engagement in the classroom; by promoting social participation and social engagement, a sense of value, belonging and attachment can be promoted (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). In this subtheme, the activities focus on valuing oneself and others, understanding and appreciating one's strengths and assets, and how to use such strengths in academic learning and social participation and interactions.

***Developing Self-Determination.*** According to self-determination theory, individuals need to feel related, competent, and autonomous for an optimal functioning and development (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theory highlights three key elements, namely that individuals have the potential to be active players in their own lives through the control of internal (motivation and emotions) and external forces; that individuals have a predisposition towards growth, development and positive functioning; and that social contexts are fundamental to nurture the natural tendency for positive functioning and growth since the latter qualities are not automatic manifestations of the developmental process (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004). The interaction between these three components is fundamental for positive development, psychological well-being, and resilience.

The first sub-theme focuses on problem orientation and problem solving skills. Problem solving is identified as one of the determinant skills to deal with adversity, since it moderates the impact of negative life events on well-being (Simões, 2012). It plays a key role in risk assessment, resources evaluation, the establishment of realistic plans, and the search for healthier relationships, which in turn are essential for adaptation and resilience (Werner & Smith, 2001). This subtheme is divided into three sets of activities that encompass the general steps of problem solving. In the first set, children are invited to define problems and generate creative solutions. The second set focuses on the evaluation of solutions and decision making, where children develop skills to evaluate solutions, the time and effort needed, and the results of the

solutions. The third set of activities highlights the implementation and evaluation of the solutions, allowing children to solve problems by trying on solutions, and evaluating the results.

The second sub-theme focuses on empowerment and autonomy. Empowerment is conceptualized as an individual's perception of personal competence and their belief that goals can be attained, while autonomy refers to a sense of one's identity and an ability to act independently and exert control over one's environment (Benard, 2004). The first set of activities focus on a sense of purpose and meaning in life, giving children the opportunity to think about global and situational meaning, and to reflect on their purposes, imagining what will happen when they grow up. The search for the meaning and goal of life is the main concern in an individual's life and, when accomplished, it has a protective effect (Noble & McGrath, 2008). The second set of activities aims to foster agency and self-efficacy, helping children to recognize that they can make things happen, can help others make things happen, and believe that they can do things, achieving their goals and overcoming obstacles. Among the mechanisms of human agency, none is more central or pervasive than belief of personal efficacy, since unless individuals believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1997). Both agency and self-efficacy have been referred as being essential to resilience (Benard, 2004; Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen, 2011). The third set of activities highlights the promotion of self-advocacy in children. Self-advocacy, or the ability to speak up for what we want and need (Schreiner, 2007), is an important component of self-determination that has been related with resilience (Goodley, 2005), since it acts as a moderator of the impact of adversity on child's psychological well-being or as a mediator, promoting self-esteem, self-awareness and a greater connection to the community, which are important resilience assets (Benard, 1999; Grover, 2005).

***Developing Communication Skills.*** The development of effective interpersonal communication skills is possible in the balanced relation between the skills of listening and understanding others, and the skills of expressing and standing for oneself. This theme takes this dual approach, first focusing on expressing and standing for oneself, and then on listening and understanding others. The first subtheme focuses on three sets of activities, namely expressing feelings and needs, standing for oneself, and assertive conflict resolution. Assertiveness enables a person to stand for oneself without hurting the others. A child that stands for him/herself states his/her needs clearly, gives feedback on somebody else's behaviour that bothers him/her, and states his/her wishes clearly and, if necessary, repeatedly. S/he is capable to say 'no', show understanding for another person and defend his/her position or integrity without harming the other. A child has no opportunity to practice assertive behaviour if s/he is not in a real or imaginary conflict with an environment. The environment in which a child can practice assertive behaviour supports his/her self-respect, allows

him/her to change his/her mind, gives him/her time to think and relieves him/her of the responsibility for the adults' behaviour and emotional states.

The second subtheme, listening to and understanding others, consists of another three sets of activities, namely effective listening, empathy, and communicating ideas effectively. Effective listening enables children to get to know, understand and accept another person. This skill is very demanding even for adults, but it is an important precondition for acquiring the skill of giving feedback and expressing empathy. Empathy is an ability to put oneself into the other person's emotional state and understand his/her position through perceived or imaginary situation in which that person is. Giving effective feedback is possible only if the relationship is based on the acceptance and an intention to understand and share the feelings, thoughts and the causes of behaviour. Feedback without empathy can influence somebody else's behaviour but is lethal for building acceptance and trust (Juul, 2008). Communication does not finish when we send a message and receive a response, rather it starts at this moment and leads towards the learning of how to communicate the ideas effectively, including an understanding of what the participants in the conversation think, feel, and intend (Schulz von Thun, 2002).

***Establishing and Maintaining Healthy Relationships.*** This theme builds on the previous one, and its first subtheme focuses on establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships. The activities of this subtheme are designed to support the development of social and prosocial skills in order to create a strong network of positive relationships, focusing on such skills as making and having friends, seeking and providing support, and nurturing relationships. Peer relationships are a very important source of well-being and resilience for children. They can help reduce, mediate and prevent the effects of stress, and also provide information to deal with difficulties (Schaffer, 1996). Children who are able to build and maintain positive relationships with friends and peers are more able to acquire social skills, develop self-awareness and awareness about others, and recruit emotional support in times of stress (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004).

The first set of activities helps children to reflect on the value of friendship and to deepen strategies to build, maintain and protect positive relationships with friends, and deal successfully with situations which may put friendship at risk. The second set of activities focuses on the development of skills to seek and provide support to others facing difficulties. Social support leads a person to believe that he/she is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and/or that he/she belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Hupcey, 1998). An important aspect of this social support system is the ability to ask help from others appropriately. This is a very important communication skill which enables the child to recruit physical, social and emotional support which protects them from the impact of negative events. Nurturing relationships are a crucial foundation for both academic and socio-emotional development, fostering warmth and intimacy, and providing

security, physical safety and protection. In the third set of activities, children have the opportunity to appreciate and practice reciprocal trust and care.

The second sub-theme is composed of activities to enhance cooperative skills, empathy and moral reasoning. The first set of activities is meant to develop skills ranging from the ability to take turns and sharing to cooperation and teambuilding, such as artwork, making collective decisions and playing games in teams. Collaboration among peers fosters children's social and emotional development, including more positive attitudes toward others (Slavin, 1980; 1990). Working with another peer, both in academic and leisure activities, also helps children to be more cooperative and respectful, while at the same time leading to higher self-esteem (Gensemer, 2000). The second set of activities is focused on the skill to recognize and appreciate the motives, behaviours, desires and feelings of others. Empathy is an essential building block for successful interpersonal relationships (Reid, Davis, Horlin, Anderson, Baughman, & Campbell, 2013), impacting also the individual's acceptance by peers, and contributing to the development of morality (Belacchi & Farina, 2012; Braza, Azurmendi, Munoz, Carreras, Braza, Garcia, Sorozaba, & Sanchez-Martón, 2009; Coplan, 2011; Eisenberg, 2000). The third set of activities helps children to critically reflect on, discuss and elaborate solutions to moral and ethical dilemmas (Gasser & Malti, 2012). Practicing ethical and responsible behaviours requires children to focus beyond the self, and develop intellectual and emotional honesty, and a willingness to confront and articulate their vulnerabilities in order to make necessary changes in their personal lives (Staub & Vollhardt, 2008).

***Turning Challenges into Opportunities.*** A tough-mindedness mindset is not something one is born with, but something that can be learned and developed by all children. By making it possible for children to learn to re-frame and turn developmental challenges or life's stressors into opportunities for growth, will help children to engage in behaviours characterized by optimism, courage, and persistence (Newman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). The first subtheme provides opportunities for children to develop courage in adversity and persistence in the face of failure, and consequently to overcome difficulties and setbacks successfully (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Showing courage in the face of adversity, either temporary or permanent, maintaining an optimistic mindset despite setbacks or unfair situations, and exhibiting persistence, are some of the key characteristics of mental toughness in the face of adversity, and key building blocks of resilience in children.

Dealing with rejection by teachers, peers and family members, and consequent negative emotions is the second subtheme. During the activities of this second subtheme, the children learn how to handle rejection by others such as peers, teachers or parents, as well as how to handle effectively negative emotions such as stress, anger, disappointment, frustration, sadness and sense of helplessness, which may emanate from the experience of rejection. Rejected children may have a lack of social-cognitive skills, including peer group entry, perception of peer group norms, response

to provocation, and interpretation of prosocial interactions (Asarnow & Callan, 1985; Dodge, 1985). Helping children to understand the causes and context of rejection by peers and others, and working on developing social-emotional skills and behaviours to deal with such situations are important factors in the development of resilience amongst children facing rejection in their lives.

Bullying is a common occurrence in many schools, particularly amongst vulnerable pupils, such as children with disability and learning difficulties, and children from ethnic minorities (De Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). Bullying is related to stress and to such negative emotions as helplessness, frustration, anger, feelings of unfairness and discrimination. It is thus necessary to equip children with the requisite skills so that they would know how to behave when they face bullying and how to manage negative emotions caused by bullying behaviour. Learning how to resolve conflicts, problem solving in bullying situations, being assertive, and learning how to be mentally tough, courageous and determined, are important skills to deal with bullying behaviours and to develop resilience in the face of this adversity (Andreou, Didaskalou, & Vlachou, 2008; Dill, Vernberg, Fonagy, Twemlow, & Gamm, 2004).

Family related stressors, such as family conflict, unrealistic parental expectations, divorce and poverty can be a significant source of stress for children (Graham, 1994; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Semel, & Shapiro, 2002). The fifth subtheme seeks to equip such children with the necessary strategies to deal effectively with the above adversities in their lives and to manage related negative emotions, such as frustration, helplessness, disappointment, and lack of security (Pedro-Caroll, 2010). The final subtheme focuses on dealing with change, transitions and loss in life. The activities enable the children to understand and deal with life's various losses, such as losing a pet, a friend, or a loved one, such as understanding loss and death and manage the negative consequences of loss by adopting a positive optimistic outlook in life. The children's ability to believe in themselves, to solve problems in new circumstances, to manage stress effectively, to self-regulate and to develop a positive mindset and optimism, are significant skills in helping children overcome successfully the challenges and bounce back to healthy development (Bonanno, 2004; Fthenakis, 2003; Niesel & Griebel, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The resilience curriculum framework presented in this paper aims to contribute to the twenty-first century European society where citizens thrive and maximise their growth, despite disadvantage or adversity, in a context fuelled by social inclusion, equity, and social justice. Where many other initiatives tend to focus on risk, this project takes a strengths-based, positive psychology stance, focusing on enhancing resilience and growth rather than simply addressing deficit and disadvantage. Rather than suggesting an add-on activity delivered by outside experts, resilience enhancement in schools is construed as a mainstream, whole school initiative with

the whole school community, including staff, parents and pupils, actively engaged in resilience building at the classroom and the whole school levels making use of both taught and caught approaches. It seeks to do so within a developmental, inclusive and culturally-responsive perspective, seeking to avoid labelling and stigmatisation. It is also based on evidence, good practice and theory as well as the realities faced by school children in the twenty-first century diverse Europe. In line with the evidence-based approach of the framework, the curriculum itself will need to be evaluated for its effectiveness in bringing about positive change and growth amongst European children, particularly amongst those most vulnerable. This is the next phase of the project, where in the coming year, the framework will be piloted in a number of schools across Europe.

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# Kurikul otpornosti za rane godine i osnovnu školu u Europi: Poboljšavanje kvalitetnog obrazovanja

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## **Sažetak**

*Oko dvadeset posto školske djece ima socijalne, emocionalne i druge probleme u ponašanju zbog čega bi im mogla zatrebati pomoć stručnjaka za mentalno zdravlje. Taj bi se postotak mogao povećati i do pedeset posto u djece lošijeg socioekonomskog statusa ili djece koja dolaze iz posebno osjetljivih zajednica. Ekonomska kriza kojom je Europa trenutno pogođena dodatno je povećala rizik među onima koji su već od prije bili suočeni s problemima poput nezaposlenosti mladih pojedinaca i obitelji, povećavanja siromaštva i socijalne nesigurnosti cijelih zajednica i regija. Ti izazovi povećavaju potrebu da se djeci već od rane dobi pruže potrebne vještine koje će im pomoći da prevladaju izazove i prepreke s kojima se u tim okolnostima suočavaju, pružajući im u isto vrijeme zdrav i zaštitnički kontekst koji će promicati njihovo zdravlje i dobrobit. U ovom je radu opisan razvoj kurikula otpornosti za djecu predškolske i osnovnoškolske dobi u Europi s ciljem poboljšanja kvalitetnog obrazovanja sve djece, uključujući i najranjivije skupine. U radu se raspravlja o okviru kurikula razvijenog iz postojeće literature, uključujući ključna načela, procese i teme koje su mu u podlozi.*

**Ključne riječi:** kurikul; kvalitetno obrazovanje za otpornost; osnovna škola, rana dob.