The role of school engagement in strengthening resilience among male street children

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Globally, considerable numbers of at-risk children continue to disengage from school by dropping out and adopting street life for various reasons. These children survive in environments that are devoid of resilience-promoting resources. In South Africa, non-governmental organisations accommodate street children in shelters and send them to schools. This qualitative South African study examined whether or not school engagement strengthened resilience among male school-going street children in residential care. We conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews with the street children who volunteered participation in this study. The study involved 17 street children aged between 11 and 17 years. The participants had lived on the streets for periods ranging from three months to five years. The participants were in Grades 6–11. The transcribed interviews were thematically analysed. The findings showed that school engagement strengthened resilience among the participants by promoting pro-social change, future orientation, opportunities for support, learning of basic skills and restoration of childhood. The findings show researchers, health-care and educational practitioners that through school engagement, schools can expose street children to healthy and supportive social and academic environments in order to enable them to regain their childhoods, remain in school and function resiliently. The findings therefore, reconfirmed school engagement as a powerful, multifaceted resilience-promoting resource even for children with street life experiences.

Keywords: protective resource; resilience; risk processes; school engagement; street child; streetism

Worldwide, considerable numbers of vulnerable children drop out of schools and adopt streetism due to personal and contextual reasons (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana 2006). Dropping out of school represents disengagement from school, a phenomenon that is rapidly increasing (Lippman & Rivers, 2008). Vulnerable children who disengage from or drop out of school and assume streetism subsist in harsh environments. In South Africa, Human and Thomas (2008, p.206) describe the situation as follows: '...many children in South Africa do not live in a safe harbour, but find themselves in the stormy sea of street life with its currents, wild winds and enormous waves.' Specifically, street life is characterised by abuse, drug abuse, neglect, abandonment, poor nutrition, lack of parental care, education and health-care, the risk of HIV infection, street crime, commercial sex work, and trafficking (Human & Thomas, 2008; Kombarakaran, 2004; West, 2003). However, families and schools can serve as safe harbours for vulnerable children by providing them with resilience resources through supportive social networks and curricula (Kruger & Prinsloo, 2008; Nickerson, Hopson, & Steinke, 2011).

The reasons that cause streetism in South Africa include poverty, dysfunctional families, urbanisation, the apartheid legacy, HIV pandemic, migrant labour system and their quest for freedom (Le Roux, 2001). These factors weaken or break the bonds that a child should have to society which, according to Hirschi's Social Bonding theory, include *attachment* to prosocial others and institutions (parents, teachers and peers), *commitment* to conventional actions (education), *involvement* in conventional activities (sports) and *belief* in values and norms (Özbay & Özcan, 2008).

There are several categories for street children. Panter-Brick (2002) refers to UNICEF's typology of children *on* the streets who maintain ties with their families and children *of* the streets with no ties with their families. West (2003) mentions street children who search for food on rubbish dumps and those who live in shelters. However, street children frequently enter and exit these

categories and this shows that they are not a homogeneous group and that the term, street child does not define them adequately (Panter-Brick, 2002).

Several studies documented individual resilience resources (humour, sense of belonging, self-sufficiency, self-determination, sense of direction, ingenuity, initiative, empathy and tenacity) and ecological protective resources (peer support and caring adults) that enabled street children with histories of school disengagement to cope resiliently in the context of streetism (Cockburn, 2004; Donald et al., 2006; Donald & Swart-Kruger, 1994; Evans, 2002; Kombarakaran, 2004; Malindi & Theron, 2010; Mathiti, 2006; Panter-Brick, 2002; Sauvé, 2003; Theron & Malindi, 2010; Vogel, 2001).

There is growing interest in how resilience and competence can be fostered in children, and the role of supportive adults including caring teachers has been emphasised (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004). Studies by Brown (2004), Garcia-Reid, Reid, and Peterson (2005), Lippman and Rivers (2008) and Covell (2010) showed that school engagement could promote resilience among children with no histories of street life and prevent them from dropping out of schools. There seems to be a dearth of studies focusing on how school engagement promoted resilience among street children in institutional care in South Africa. Therefore, the aim of our study was to explore how school engagement encouraged resilience among street children who lived in a shelter.

School engagement

School engagement is a multifaceted construct that involves behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects of development (Lippman & Rivers, 2008). Sharkey, You, and Schnoebelen (2008), cite researchers such as O'Farrell and Morrison (2003) who noted that school engagement was used synonymously with terms such as school bonding, attachment, connectedness, involvement, and commitment. These terms imply full participation in school activities, providing access to social networks and academic support that promote resilience in vulnerable learners.

Traditionally, schools focused on enhancing academic, behavioural, and cognitive development in learners; however, a need has arisen for schools to also focus on fostering relationship-building, school spirit, activity involvement, a health-promoting school climate and safety (Sharkey et al., 2008). Schools are currently required to facilitate support for learners facing adversity so that they can cope resiliently (Mampane & Bouwer, 2006). In this regard, schools should create anxiety-free learning environments that promote self-efficacy, enjoyment of school, healthy classroom participation, self-esteem, and motivation (Martin & Marsh, 2006) in order to prevent learners from dropping out of school and adopting streetism. Full participation in schools increases intrinsic motivation and active engagement (Covell, 2010).

Teachers can foster competencies in vulnerable children by structuring and planning activities, assignments, and lessons to incorporate learners' interests, abilities, experiences, prior knowledge and learning styles (Kruger & Prinsloo, 2008; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Schools can encourage personnel to pay attention to each learner, know their names, encourage them to fully participate in class, listen to learners with problems, express respect, have high expectations for learners and maximise opportunities for relationship-building (Brooks, 2006).

A study by Aronowitz (2005) showed that caring and competent teachers could promote positive development in learners by believing in their learners' potential, coaching learners to set high expectations, making learners feel valued and competent, and encouraging them to envision the future. Vulnerable learners, including street children, who feel supported by positive adults avoid trouble at school, get good grades, and pursue future success (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). Social supports that teachers, friends and parents can provide positively relate to school engagement (Anderson et al., 2004; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). Levels of school engagement are higher in schools with adequate support structures, challenging curricula, caring teachers, peer acceptance, consistent goals and a school community that fosters belongingness (Hughes, Zhang, & Hill, 2006; Lippman & Rivers, 2008).

Dropping out of school and street life prevent children from benefitting from the resilience-promoting resources schools provide. Dass-Brailsford (2005) isolated individual resilience resources (goal orientation, initiative, motivation and an understanding of the self as possessing a measure of agency) and ecological resilience resources (supportive families, role models, supportive schools and communities) that promoted academic resilience in learners in South African schools. In a study of resilience among township youth in South Africa, Theron (2007) found that the learning area, Life Orientation, prepared learners for life and taught life skills that promoted resilience.

Theron (2008) noted that Grade 9 learners' opinions of the Life Orientation learning area confirmed that Life Orientation taught knowledge, skills and attitudes that buffered risks besetting township life in South Africa. A South African study by Xaba and Malindi (2010) found that some schools in economically disadvantaged areas engaged in entrepreneurial activities in order to acquire resources that enabled them to improve the learners' educational lives and well-being in class and the general school environment. Findings from these South African studies showed that schools can expose learners to protective resources or assets through curricula, active parental support, community involvement, and entrepreneurial activities in order to enhance resilience among learners.

Protective resources operate at individual, familial, community, cultural and institutional levels to buffer the impact of risks on learners (Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2004; Ungar, 2004). This confirms that resilience depends on the youths' abilities to negotiate and navigate their pathways towards health-enhancing resources that their ecologies should provide in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2006; Ungar, 2011). Resilience is a common phenomenon that results from the effective operation of ordinary magic or basic human adaptational systems (Masten, 2001). Engaging schools awaken basic adaptational systems in learners, thus strengthening their coping abilities in the face of adversity.

Research paradigm

Street children are viewed from a deficit-oriented and reactive perspective that does not empower people (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007) and disregards their strengths (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). Earlier studies portrayed street youth as vulnerable and tended to rely on adults' assumptions on how children feel or what they need (Driessnack, 2005; Ennew, 2003). From the transformative paradigm, we viewed street children as agents, active participants and equal individuals who can cope resourcefully with their lives and not as helpless victims who should receive pity and charity (Evans et al., 2007; Mertens, 2005). We sought to highlight the strengths that school engagement provided for street children to cope resiliently.

Ethics

We received written permission to conduct this study from the non-governmental organisation that cared for the participants. We explained the nature and goals of the study to the care-givers and participants and assured them that their rights to human dignity and privacy would be respected. We assured them that their responses would be kept confidential (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2007). The participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Participation in the study was voluntary and the partcipants could withdraw at any time (Babbie & Mouton, 2007). The participants signed consent forms that were co-signed by caregivers at the shelter. The participants understood that the findings would be disseminated without revealing their identities. This study was ethically cleared by the Ethics Committee of North-West University. We adhered to the ethical principles of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP).

METHOD

We wished to understand how school engagement enhanced resilience among street youths. We pursued an exploratory, qualitative study focusing on the participants' experiences, feelings, percep-

tions and social situations in relation to school engagement and their coping abilities (Terre Blanche et al., 2007)

Participant sampling

The participants were 17 African boys who spoke IsiZulu and Sesotho. Most street children in South Africa are African and male (Le Roux, 2001). They were aged from 11 to 17 years and lived in a shelter after spending between three months and five years on the streets. They attended school regularly and were in Grades 6 to 11. We sampled purposefully, focusing on participants who were representative of the street child population in South Africa (Maree & Pietersen, 2007; Terre Blanche et al., 2007) namely, children who had spent time living and working on the streets.

Data collection

We met the participants at the shelter after school. We explained to them that our discussions were going to focus on their school experiences and how school involvement had enabled them to cope with their lives. We conducted focus group interviews with 17 male participants. Two of the three focus group interviews involved six participants while one focus group interview involved five participants. We limited the group sizes to six participants in order to ensure maximum participation. Four of the participants were in Grade 6, three in Grade 7, two in Grade 8, four in Grade 9, two in Grade 10 and two in Grade 11. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in the Sesotho language that they all understood. The interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed, and translated into English. The transcript was back-translated into Sesotho for consistency. These focus group interviews enabled us to understand the inter-subjective school experiences that the participants shared (Terre Blanche et al., 2007). The participants agreed and disagreed on certain points, providing us with richer data since they could build on each others' ideas (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

Data analysis

The transcript was duplicated and we coded the data individually. The data were analysed using the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach since we were interested in the life-worlds or lived human experiences of the participants (Laverty, 2003). We discussed the themes and reclassified them based on consensus. A fellow Sesotho-speaking social worker joined these discussions and verified the themes and another round of consensus discussions followed. This member-checking exercise heightened the trustworthiness of our findings.

FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from the data reflected positive influences that school engagement had on the participants. These positive influences included pro-social change, future orientation, opportunities for support, learning of basic skills, and restoration of childhood. These themes are discussed here.

Pro-social change

The findings showed that school engagement changed the participants' lives after they had been disrupted by streetism. The participants were glad to be in school and they were motivated to act pro-socially. For example, Zipho said: *School has changed my life and opened my mind. I am glad that I am in school now. I am clever now and I no longer do the things I used to do when we were living on the streets.* This participant felt that school contributed to his intellectual development.

Schools enabled the participants to interact with peers and adults and that interaction ended their feelings of loneliness. For instance, Lerato said: *School opened my mind too. I can now interact with other children and big people. School is good and you can be very lonely when you are alone. I shall*

not go to the streets any more, I have friends at school. It is important to note that the joy of school re-engagement meant that Lerato intended not to resume street life, thus leaving his newly found friends behind.

Schools increased the participants' knowledge and awareness that school was important. The participants no longer had to steal to survive. The following quote from Zintle bears evidence of the above: *I know many things now that I am in school. School is very important to me. For example, sometimes when I was alone, I used to think of naughty things like stealing; things can be tough if you are a man*. School therefore, encouraged the participants not to adopt unconventional coping mechanisms that often characterise street life.

The participants learned how to relate meaningfully to other people at school. For example, Khaya said: *At school you learn that when you meet a mother in town or elsewhere, you must greet her nicely. You do not know that perhaps she might help you*. It is clear that school engagement taught them values such as respect and courtesy.

The participants demonstrated the ability to cognitively appraise situations and follow that with appropriate decisions. In this regard, Jabu pointed out that he was unhappy with his life on the streets and decided to go to the shelter. He also decided not to continue doing the things he used to do on the streets: *I was unhappy with my life on the streets. So I decided to come to the shelter. I told myself that I had to behave in school and not do the things we used to do on the streets*. Contrary to commonly held views that street children are controlled by circumstances, this statement shows that this participant was determined to change the circumstances affecting his life.

Street children grow up without parental supervision and this retards the learning of pro-social behaviour. However, school engagement taught the participants to be socially competent. This means that the participants learned obedience and how to behave in social settings. For example, Thela said: *School teaches you to be obedient and to behave well as a child. You can get support in school from teachers if you are not feeling well*. It is noteworthy that caring teachers provided emotional support to the participants and made adjustment easier.

Life on the streets exposes children to waywardness. However, school taught the participants to regulate their behaviours according to social conventions. In this instance, Lefa pointed out: *We very easily get into mischief when we are not in school. To improve my life I stopped smoking and I play more football. I know that football will take me far. I am a good boy and I am no longer on the streets like before*. In this regard, school engagement restored childhood to Lefa since he could play football with other children and refrain from abusing substances.

Communication is an important interpersonal life skill. The participants learned healthy communication skills through their involvement in school. For instance, Buhle said: *At school you learn how to communicate. You learn English so that you can communicate with people from other countries*. Communication is very important. It is noteworthy that the participants value the learning of English as a language that is deemed to be important for interpersonal communication.

Future orientation

Schools prepared the participants for the future and exposed them to different careers. This made them aware that they could become important people because of possible future employment. In this regard, Musa said: *School prepares you for the future because you learn about different careers and this gives you hope that you will be employed in future*. This shows that schools gave the participants hope and provided pathways to brighter futures. Furthermore, schools made it possible for the participants to benefit from social grants that are provided by the state. For example, Sanele added: *I agree that school gives you opportunities in life ... ones you would not have. But you can get a social grant only if you go to school*. The participant was aware that access to grants and school attendance were connected.

School engagement enabled the participants to dream as children usually do. In this regard,

Lwazi wished to become a social worker after completing his university education. For example, Lwazi remarked: *My dream is to become a social worker. I am glad that through school one can later go to university and become a social worker.* School represented a complete change of focus from street life to the future. In this regard, Litho pointed out: *Ja* [Yes] *before I went back to school, I did not care much about the future. But now that I am back in school, I am going to be a pilot.* This shows that the participant was aware that school was important for him to achieve his dreams.

Opportunities for support

The participants pointed out that school engagement enabled them to enjoy the social support that a school as a microsystem offers. As Themba indicated, it was possible for him to approach his teachers when he had problems. Teachers at Themba's school were ready to listen to learners and support them: *At school, when I have a problem, I am glad to know that I can talk to teacher Zim ... He is always willing to listen to me and to support me.* The connectedness to significant adults that schools offered through caring teachers enabled the participants to resiliently cope with their lives.

School connectedness enabled the participants to benefit from the support that their peers could offer. Like teachers, friends were willing to listen to the participants when they had problems and offered them support. For example, Utaka pointed out: *At school I can talk to my friends if I have a problem. My friends listen to me and advise me accordingly. Friends can also help you with school work.* It seems that peer support was extended to include school work and that it promoted coping in the participants.

School engagement provided more choices for the participants. However, that depended on the nature of the support needed, as Zintle pointed out: *With me it depends on the kind of support or advice I need. If the advice I need can be provided by a friend, then I approach him. If not, I go to a big person.* School involvement alleviated feelings of sadness in the participants. In this regard, Thela pointed out that they approached either their friends or teachers for support when they felt sad: *When you feel sad, you know your friends are there to support you. I also know that my teacher will be there to make me feel better. Teachers give you the support you need.* It is evident that the participants' ability to cope with sadness depended on the social networks that school involvement offered.

The participants noted the importance of having someone who was willing to listen to them empathetically and helped them to cognitively appraise situations for better understanding. In this regard, Lerato said: *When you talk to someone when you are sad, he can help you see the problem differently and you feel better.* Other people assisted the participants in exploring difficult situations, thereby enhancing coping.

However, support was not unidirectional. The participants received support but they reciprocated it as Lumko indicated: *I also help some of my friends when they have problems at school. At school I know that in turn I can rely on my friends too. We advise them accordingly even here at the shelter. When they are sick, I help them take medication like when Sanele here was sick. Again, if one of us needs help with the washing we help him.* School engagement taught the participants that one should receive support and provide it in return.

Teachers encouraged the participants to work hard, persevere and not lose hope. Participants received help when they needed stationery. Musa said: *You get a lot of advice from teachers not to be lazy or naughty ... to persevere and not lose hope. We are taught to lend a pen to a friend when he does not have one.* This shows that teachers encouraged sharing and kindness among learners as Khaya further pointed out: *We are taught to share things with friends. I have learned to be kind-hearted and others also help me a lot. In my case I also talk to my girlfriend ...* (Giggles shyly.) *We go to a park just to clear my mind so that I can feel better.* A girlfriend was a source of support to the participant.

Involvement in school enabled teachers to support learners who needed health care and food.

In this regard, Musa said: *Once I fell ill while I was at school. I was hungry and I did not have food. I told my guardian teacher about it and she said I must always tell her when I am hungry. She gave me a sandwich and a letter and sent me to the clinic*. This shows that teachers at these schools cared about the well-being of their learners, including the participants.

School engagement promoted a resilience-promoting sense of belonging in the participants. The sense of belonging that the participants enjoyed developed their self-confidence as Lumko pointed out: *At school I feel I belong. I am like other children and I feel like I am part of the school. My performance used to be poor but now it has improved a lot because I like being at school. School work does not confuse me anymore because teachers support me*. The participant enjoyed being at school and his performance improved because of the support that teachers provided.

School involvement enabled the participants to enjoy feelings of safety that are not associated with streetism. In this regard, Utho said: *When I am at school, I feel safer. Teachers care for us and nothing can harm you when you are at school, unlike on the streets*. To this Zintle added: *Ja* [Yes] *school saves your life. On the streets you are abused but it is nice being with other children and teachers where you can learn and play safely*. It will be remembered that street life is characterised by a lack of safety, parental care and supervision. It is evident that school engagement was protective because it enabled learners to feel safe and cared for again.

Children benefit from having positive role models. Engagement in school exposed the participants to positive role models. Caring teachers and politicians served as role models for the participants, as Lwazi indicated: *My role models are teacher Ann and the premier of the Free State. We get social grants from the government. These people are caring and help us a lot, you see*. It is interesting that the participant admired the people he perceived as being helpful and supportive.

Learning of basic skills

Schools teach basic academic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics. Street children lose opportunities to learn these skills but the findings show that school engagement enabled the participants to learn basic skills such as reading and writing. Zipho pointed out: *Now I know how to read and write. We can learn and become someone important. I am happy about it*. It is evident from this statement that the participant was happy and hopeful about the future.

The participants usually have backlogs in learning. Committed and supportive teachers in schools were helpful in assisting the participants to overcome the backlogs they experienced in their studies. In this regard, the participants received education, gained valuable knowledge, and improved their scholastic performance. For example, Utho said: *School helps me to be educated. I gain knowledge and I am glad because we do not have to buy books. My performance was bad but my teachers never lost patience with me. I perform well in school*. It seems that the participant was able to get the resources he needed for school and to compare his earlier performance to recent performance.

Lefa added that patient teachers enabled him to do well in all his subjects. Teachers taught him to write his name, something he could not do while living on the streets: *My performance is balanced in all learning areas. And now I know how to write my name unlike before I went back to school*. This finding shows that the participant had become academically resilient as a result of school engagement.

Restoration of childhood

Schools gave the participants opportunities to play and be involved in extramural activities. Play and extramural activities facilitated coping in the participants by alleviating feelings of sadness, as Buhle pointed out: *At school I get opportunities to play with other children, to sing in the choir and to play football. When I feel bad I go out and play with friends*. Playing and involvement in extramural activities at school were protective processes that buffered the effects of risk. School engagement

enabled the participants to participate in organised school excursions that served as protective resources since they improved Themba's mood. For example, Themba said: *To add to what Buhle says ... I enjoy excursions a lot. We once visited a zoo in Bloemfontein and I was happy to see those animals. I missed my parents, but going to the zoo made me feel happy again*. The fact that schools enabled the participants to undertake excursions made them cope with their lives.

DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to explore how well school engagement strengthened resilience among the street youths who lived in a shelter and attended school regularly. The findings demonstrated that resilience could result from ordinary human adaptational systems (Masten, 2001), namely, school engagement. Schools served as safe harbours (Human & Thomas, 2008) for the participants and enabled them to experience prosocial changes. Street life offers no prospects for the future since street children lose opportunities to acquire qualifications (Vogel, 2001). However, school engagement enabled the participants to dream again. This demonstrates the power of school engagement in enabling children with histories of streetism to recognise the value of school in achieving their dreams.

The role of supportive adults (caring teachers) in promoting resilience in street children became evident (Anderson et al., 2004). In this regard, school engagement offered street children opportunities to re-establish positive social bonds with other children and teachers as competent adults instead of relying on one another as they did on the streets (Vogel, 2001). These opportunities for social support and meaningful attachment are necessary for young people to cope resiliently (Ungar, 2006). Schools enabled the participants to reclaim their childhoods through ordinary adaptational systems such as curricula, extramural activities, active participation in school activities and social support (Masten, 2001; Le Roux, 2001). The participants had role models (Vogel, 2001) such as social workers due to re-established social bonds.

Viewed from the positive psychology perspective that focuses on strengths rather than on weaknesses, the findings show that street children are capable of resilience as earlier studies showed (Donald et al., 2006; Kombarakaran, 2004; Malindi & Theron, 2010; Theron & Malindi, 2010). The participants navigated their pathways to resilience conventionally (Ungar, 2006). This finding is important for practitioners in the fields of education and helping professions. It means that intervention programs should incorporate the strengths that street children have acquired. The findings highlight the importance of a healthy and stimulating environment in enhancing resilience in at-risk learners. The role of mediated learning in eliminating backlogs was highlighted. This shows that street children's development can be accelerate given mediated learning experiences.

There were limitations to our study. Our sample was small and limited to street boys residing in a shelter, therefore, our findings cannot be generalised beyond the sample itself. It would be interesting to learn, on further study, how school engagement could encourage resilience among street girls and other categories of street youths such as children on and of the street. Further longitudinal, mixed methods studies could shed more light on these findings. Future studies could use visual methods of gathering data to offset the tendency of street youth to be guarded during one-on-one interviews. Our study did not entail asking the participants to define school engagement and say what encouraged them to remain engaged.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations, our study confirmed that street children's lives can be transformed through school engagement. Engaging schools provided the protection that street children needed and enabled them to develop in child-friendly environments. School engagement prevented street children from dropping out of schools again and encouraged them to behave prosocially. These youths could think about the future once more and enjoy their restored childhoods.

We recommend that school engagement be used to promote care, enjoyment of school, self-efficacy, healthy classroom participation, a sense of belonging, all forms of support, self-esteem, motivation, the learning of basic academic skills, social competencies, relationship-building, feelings of being valued, the envisioning of the future and avoidance of trouble at school. This may promote resilience in vulnerable learners and prevent streetism. Schools that provide these protective resources contribute towards the attainment of the millennium goals.

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