

Towards a Pedagogy of Youth Resilience: Reframing the Understanding of the Term 'YOUTH'

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Active Thinking and Resilience

The American Psychological Association (2003)¹ defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of” or “the ability to adapt well to”² adversity, threats, trauma, tragedy, or significant accounts of stress in life such as family breakdown, problems in interpersonal relationships, health, finances, situational pressures etc. Resilience also refers to the ability to bounce back from difficult experiences which is not a personality trait or innately acquired but involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned and developed.

Curtis & Chicchetti (2003)³ noted that while biological hereditary factors do feature in individual differences when confronted with the recovery from trauma, these factors are not set permanently but assume the characteristics defined as ‘plasticity’, a term derived from engineering, that is the ability to deform under stress and return to equilibrium, where the maximum stress is held just under breaking point. Additional stress in excess would cause a rupture to the component under stress. In mental health perspective, this could be described as the point when a person enters into a psychological disorder. Summarising from various research literatures, Curtis & Chicchetti point out that better intellectual skills, referring to traditional measures of cognitive functioning such as memory, attention, reasoning and behaviour inhibition among others, correlates positively with resilience.

Summarizing M. Kroverts’ *Fostering Resilience* published Clearing House in 1999, Petterson (2001)⁴ wrote,

”Resilient children and adolescents consistently have been defined in the psychological literature as having four primary attributes: 1) social competence, including the ability to seek help and elicit positive responses from peers and adults; 2) problem-solving skills and confidence in oneself and one's ability to plan; 3) autonomy, defined as a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently; and 4) a sense of purpose and belief in the future.”

From the above, it can be inferred that the role of cognition and active thinking plays a central part in resilience to traumatic experience. As such, instilling the will to think and exercise of the intellectual faculty may become necessary as the first step towards the pedagogy of youth resilience.

Reframing the Understanding of the Term ‘YOUTH’

A brief survey of lexical definitions of the term ‘youth’ list phrases such as: a) being young, b) time when someone is young, c) young person, d) early stage, and e) young people etc. While these terms allow quick recall and connection of the concept and the construct behind the concept, they do not allow the provision of contrast with other related concepts describing young persons; child, adolescent, teenager, juvenile, minor etc.

A young person may desist being called a child or minor as it might provoke a feeling of being belittled or being patronised. Similarly, the term juvenile when referred to young persons might evoke an essentialist association with negative constructs such as ‘juvenile delinquent’, ‘juvenile court’ and ‘juvenile crimes’ etc. These terms when used upon a young person from the point of view of human potential development and positive transformation might yield counter productive reactions. Discontentment, disagreement, disapproval and rebellion in various degrees of manifestations might be reflected in the young person’s behaviour as a recipient of such tags.

Terms such as adolescent, teens and teenagers reflect a categorical typology to differentiate the particular period life usually between puberty to adulthood, with overlaps depending on the cultural and legal prescriptions. The National Youth Council sets the working definition of youth as “those between the ages of 15 and 30”⁵ which is a categorical description with overlaps with the term teens, teenagers and adults.

From the point of view of human potential development and positive transformation, I propose a reframed understanding to the term ‘youth’. The term ‘Youth’ can be used as a classification of young people who express the characteristics of being 1) young and 2) exercises a higher order thinking to a greater degree than that associated with children. As such, the term ‘YOUTH’ connotes, through an abbreviated emphasis with the merger of two significant words ‘YOUng’ & ‘THinking’, the characteristics stated above. Additionally, capitalised letters: YOUTH; YOU, YOUng & THinking emphasizes the conferment of ‘YOUTH’ from the sender to the young person as the recipient of the message as opposed to a self-proclamation; I am a youth.

With the reframed understanding of the term ‘youth’, the antithesis to the characteristics such as young and irresponsible, young and rebellious, young and dangerous (i.e. not weighing risks to self or others), young and deviant etc. would draw reference to the other associated terms defining a young person; i.e. 1) child, a young person who refrains from taking responsibilities for their actions (i.e. being childish, infantile behaviour) 2) minor, a young person who fails to express thoughtful considerations to self and others, in the process risks participating in self destructive or hurtful behaviour, the assumption assigned to young persons who are under aged to perform acts requiring ‘informed decision’ (e.g. consuming alcohol, enter into sexual relations, watching movies with excessive violence or sexual elements 3) juvenile, a young person who acts with neglect to law and order, such that active measures have to be taken to restrain such actions. The three antitheses reflect an immaturity in the cognitive processes, i.e. the young person is not able to anticipate through thoughtful cognitive process of his/her actions with the possible consequences thus do not reflect one who is ‘YOUng & Thinking’.

Application of a Reframed Understanding of ‘YOUTH’ in Training & Development

Erich Fromm in 1979⁶ highlighted the difference between having and being. He problematised the notion *‘if one has nothing, one is nothing’* and its impact towards the living of life. Such a notion would lead equating self worth to tangible (material goods) or imaginary (persona, power) possessions. In the event of a tragedy or traumatic experience where the possessions are stripped instantaneously, it is likely that the stress on the individual’s ‘plasticity’ would be in excess of the threshold and would induce breaking. In the formulation of a pedagogy of resilience, it is perhaps necessary to encourage the attitude of ‘being’. For instance, instead of an emphasis on ‘having knowledge’ where knowledge rests on the paradigm of commodity, it would be better to emphasis ‘knowing’, a state of being. Instead of an emphasis of ‘having freedom’, usually connotes a being free from a situation of captivity, it is perhaps better to emphasise the state of being free, that is the freedom to do something (Fromm, 1994/1941)⁷.

In attempt to apply the reframed understanding of ‘YOUTH’, the pedagogical approach here is the emphasis on the present state of being ‘young’ and the continuous state ‘thinking’. Being young, as oppose to being old, invites the connotation of being energetic, vigorous and the ability to learn. The continuous state of active thinking by adopting the various styles and methodology, encourages the young person to not only draws in information, but to actively and creatively

reorganise and synergise the much information absorbed over time to overcome challenges and obstacles. This is unlike a young person who is adopting the antithesis to thinking; i.e. passivity in the use of information. Such passivity would allow for situations where uninformed or misinformed decisions are made and blind submission to decisions made others.

Maximising on the need to feel good, reframing and raising the definition of 'YOUTH' from a mere description of a state of being young; which is similar in lexical terms to child, juvenile, adolescent, and teens etc., 'YOUTH' redefined as a state of being young and actively thinking could serve as a motivational 'branding' for young persons as a positive identification. The positive motivational drive would only contribute to the development of resilience amongst youth.

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END NOTES

¹ American Psychological Association (2003). *The Road to Resilience*. Available online at [Hwww.helping.apa.org](http://www.helping.apa.org)H

² American Psychological Association (2003). *Resilience for Kids and Teens, a Guide for Parents and Teachers*. Available online at [Hwww.helping.apa.org](http://www.helping.apa.org)H

³ Curtis, W.J & Chicchetti, D. (2003). 'Moving Research on Resilience into the 21st century: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Examining the Biological Contributors to Resilience' in *Development and Psychopathology*, 15 (2003), 773-810. New York: Cambridge University Press

⁴ Patterson, J. H., (2001, Spring). 'Resiliency: A Key Element for Supporting Youth At-Risk' in *Childhood Education*. Maryland: Association for Childhood Education International

⁵ *National Youth Council*, <http://www.nyc.gov.sg/user/faq.htm>

⁶ Fromm, E. (1979/1976). *To Have or To Be?* London: Abacus

⁷ Fromm, E. (1994/1941). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Henry Holt & Company