



Fostering Resilience: An exploration of the link between resilience, outcomes and foster care in Ireland

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a Masters degree (2012) by Danielle Douglas of the Department of Humanities (Applied Arts), Waterford Institute of Technology, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

This research seeks to explain why some children in foster care experience more positive outcomes than their peers. The specific objectives of the research are:

- » to review the literature available on the theory of resilience as it applies to children in foster care;
- » to explore the understanding of resilience and outcomes by foster carers and social workers in Ireland, and their experience of training in the area;
- » to analyse what children in foster care believe are factors promoting resilience and successful outcomes;
- » to examine the attitudes and experiences of care leavers in order to determine what they felt contributed to their outcomes and whether they felt resilience was a part of this;
- » to compare and contrast the factors promoting resilience according to the literature with those identified by the key stakeholders involved in foster care in Ireland.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, Waterford Institute of Technology.

3. How was the study undertaken?

A two-phase sequential explanatory mixed methods research design was used. In Phase 1, questionnaires were distributed to adult stakeholders in foster care, mainly foster carers and social workers (n=87); the purpose was to explore their views on resilience and foster care in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the risk and protective factors leading to outcomes. In Phase 2, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young people in foster care, aged 12-18 years (n=4), and with young people over 18 who spent time in foster care (n=4); the purpose was to explore in a sensitive manner the key concepts of the study from the young people's perspective and to compare their views with the adult stakeholders.

Essentially, this research was conducted from the position that young people who are or have been in care are the experts on their own lives and as such, much can be gained from their participation.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Findings from Phase 1

- » **Understanding of resilience:** Overall, 80% of the respondents (both foster carers (FC) and social workers (SW)) confirmed that they had heard of the concept of resilience prior to completing the questionnaire. Foster carers shared their opinions on the meaning of the concept of resilience, with many stating that it is a process rather than a general trait. One foster carer stated: *'I think resilience can be promoted in children to a degree, but it is in fact a combination of factors'* (Respondent 31, FC). A number of social workers also outlined their understanding of resilience, with many referring to it as an individual trait within the child or young person. One social worker stated that *'resilience explains why some foster children cope with a litany of losses and why others can't cope at all'* (Respondent 47, SW).
- » **Training on the topic of resilience:** The majority of respondents (95.3%), both foster carers and social workers, agreed that there is a definite need for training in the area of resilience. However, less than one-quarter of respondents had actually been offered or participated in such training. The majority who had received training were social workers and this was primarily undertaken as part of their initial Social Work degree. Two foster carers, from a possible 46, had participated in training sessions on the topic of resilience; the maximum number of sessions completed by this cohort was one.
- » **Factors promoting resilience:** From a list of factors identified in the literature as promoting resilience, respondents were invited to rate them in order of their importance in a Likert-type question. The factors that scored the highest (i.e. where participants ticked 'very important') were:
 - » child feeling listened to (88.4%);
 - » having a warm relationship with carer (80.7%);
 - » child not experiencing multiple moves (78.6%);
 - » child having a sense of identity (76.5%).
- » **Resources to promote resilience:** Almost 80% of all respondents stated that they felt there were not enough adequate resources

to allow foster carers to promote resilience. The reasons for this were attributed to a lack of support for foster carers, as outlined by Respondent 61 who said, *'I feel foster carers often don't feel supported themselves and this can make it difficult in turn to promote resilience in their foster children'*. Similarly, the majority of respondents (88%) stated that they felt there were not enough resources for social workers to promote resilience and the reasons for this were attributed primarily to a shortage of social workers.

- » **Outcomes for young people in foster care:** Respondents varied in their knowledge of the outcomes that children in their care had experienced. The majority of foster carers still had contact with some of the young people who had left their care (n=38). However, the number of young people with whom they remained in contact varied greatly. Foster carers offered various explanations for the lack of contact with young people, which included *'lack of knowledge of their whereabouts'*, *'difficulties with placement ending'* and *'young people did not want to continue the relationship'*. In contrast, the findings show that over half of the social workers (n=15 or 52%) do not have any contact with the children previously on their caseload. Respondents' knowledge of the known outcomes (both positive and negative) for young people in their care are summarised in two diagrams reproduced in the full report.

4.2 Findings from Phase 2

The findings from Phase 2 were delineated in terms of what children in foster care and care leavers believe are factors promoting resilience and successful outcomes for them. As a collective group, the sample had an accumulation of 88 years' experience of living in foster care.

- » **Factors promoting resilience:** Participants referred to many different factors which they felt had either helped to promote their own resilience or had the potential to promote the resilience of children and young people in foster care in general. The majority of factors identified were either believed to be inherent in the individual child (e.g. *'feeling like I belong'*, *'ability to express myself'* and *'being positive'*) or micro-systemic (e.g. *'feeling part of the*

family', 'foster carers who make an effort' and 'a safe environment'). Meso-systemic factors identified by the group included 'having a good social worker', 'foster family supportive of birth family' and 'support'.

- » **Factors preventing resilience:** Much of this discussion related to the presence or absence of protective factors (e.g. a young person 'having someone to talk to') and risk factors (e.g. 'having no one to talk to'). A number of variables were included among these factors, such as 'lack of control over their life', 'feeling different' and 'foster carer's lack of understanding'. However, the most commonly cited factors were those in relation to support from a social worker: the young people collectively listed 'lack of support from a social worker', 'no effort from a social worker' and 'lack of social work support for foster carers' as being factors most likely to reduce children's levels of resilience.
- » **Successful outcomes:** According to the young participants, the single factor identified as being most likely to indicate a positive or successful outcome for them was 'being happy'. Many other factors were also mentioned, such as the link between success and 'emotional success', 'overcoming pain', 'doing what you want', 'education', 'employment', 'being a good parent' and 'doing what is right'. In addition, a number of the young people commented that people's outcomes could not be measured since this was dependent on individual characteristics and circumstances. All of the young people in this study identified themselves as being both resilient and successful in their own right.

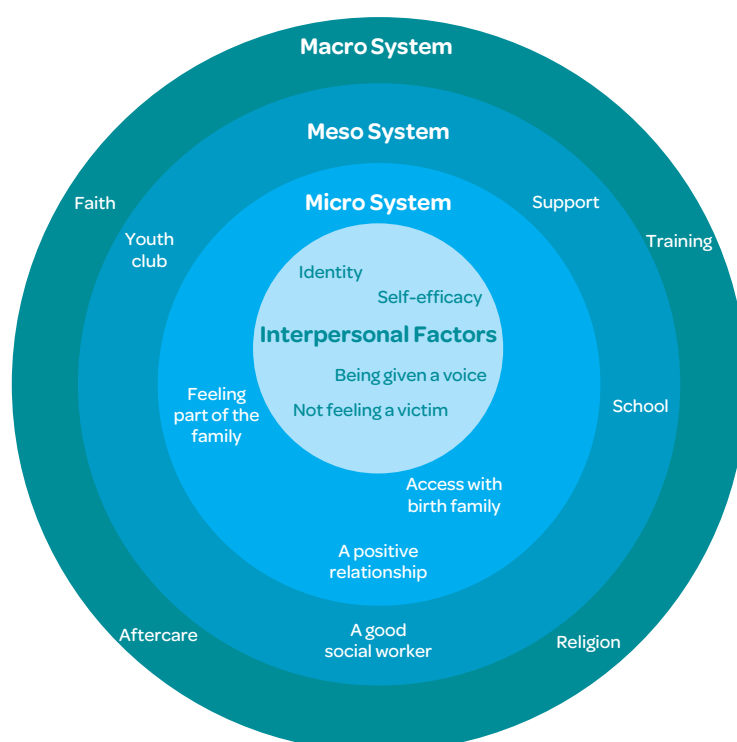
4.3 Overall findings from Phases 1 and 2

- » **Factors promoting resilience:** Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data found that the key factors promoting resilience according to the study sample included: being given a voice; having a positive identity; feeling part of the foster family; having friends; having a good social worker; feeling supported; access to aftercare services; and a sense of faith or religion. Interestingly, while these factors were listed as being important for resilience, all of the young people in the study stated that at various stages throughout their lives in foster care, many

of these protective factors were not present.

Having identified the factors promoting resilience from foster carers and social workers in Phase 1 and from young people in Phase 2, these were then integrated to provide overall findings. The results are displayed in Figure 1, using an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's 1979 Model.

Figure 1: Key findings on factors promoting resilience
(adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Model, 1979)



- » **Participants' perceptions of outcomes:** The key factors that participants identified as most likely to indicate 'successful' outcomes varied across the different groups. Social workers listed 'having an education' as the factor most likely to indicate success, and while this also featured high on the foster carers' list, they recorded 'having a solid relationship' as their foremost factor indicating success. Perhaps the most poignant finding of the study was the fact that the children and young people equated 'being happy' with being successful. While they acknowledged that education, employment and raising their own families were indicators of success, when asked 'What would make you feel successful?', all of them referred to 'being happy' as the most important factor.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached a number of overall conclusions, as follows:

1. Foster care in Ireland can be an adverse experience for many children and young people.

The overall findings from the literature review suggest that foster care can be denoted as a protective mechanism since it removes the young person from an environment that is considered to constitute a threat to his or her safety or development. However, it may also pose additional threats, particularly as research has shown it potentially involves severing ties with significant persons and multiple moves from one resource to another. The data from the fieldwork also indicate many areas of foster care that were not conducive to the growth and development of a young person's resilience. These included factors such as lack of a social worker, feeling stigmatised for being in foster care, issues affecting identity development, and educational issues, such as having to move schools.

2. The level of training, both in general and in relation to resilience, available for both foster carers and social workers is not sufficient.

Both sets of participants expressed a desire and a need to be educated and trained in these areas. However, they were not optimistic about receiving such training due to a lack of resources. The majority of respondents felt the subject of resilience is not a priority, given the lack of training and the high caseloads of social workers.

3. Resilience is a complex concept, but is best considered as a process that occurs across the different ecological subsystems of a child's life.

The literature review revealed that many researchers are unable to agree on a basic definition of 'resilience'. Most definitions described resilience as some form of 'adaptation' to difficult circumstances. In the present research, both sets of participants offered their own definitions, some of which reflected those in the literature while others were unique to the study. One such definition was provided by 'Ciara' (aged 17), who suggested that resilience is *'going through tough problems and all that stuff, and you know having a new result from your past and all that stuff, you know, being a new person from your past'*. So this young person sees resilience not

only as an adaptation of a person in order to deal with difficult situations, but also as an ability to form an entirely new personality. The combined results from both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the study found that for children in foster care, resilience occurs as a result of a combination of individualistic traits and a mixture of factors across their ecological subsystems. In addition, within these contexts, children are not simply submissive recipients of contextual forces, but are capable of negotiating and influencing, as well as being influenced by, their circumstances.

4. There are many factors that may promote resilience in children in foster care, many of which are related to the idea of permanency.

Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data suggests that the key factors promoting resilience as identified by the participants included being given a voice, having a positive identity, feeling part of the foster family, having friends, having a good social worker, feeling supported, having access to aftercare services and having a sense of faith or religion. All of these factors are in some way linked to the idea of consistency or permanency. Essentially, the young people and adults felt that if children in foster care have a sense of security and permanency, then all of the other factors would fall into place.

5. The notion of 'successful' outcomes for young people in foster care has different meanings for the different cohorts of participants.

Many of the adults and young people in the study shared their concerns about the difficulties associated with measuring or comparing the outcomes for young people. One young person ('Jim', aged 19) commented: *'I think emotionally, you have to be ... there's emotional success ... and that's so important'*. The key factors identified by participants as most likely to indicate successful outcomes also varied across the different groups. While both groups discussed education as being important, the adults listed this as most likely to indicate success, while the young people equated 'being happy' with being successful. 'Tanya' (aged 26) summed up the findings from the young people in this study when she responded to the question 'Do you feel successful in your life at the moment?', to which she simply replied, *'Yes, I'm happy. So yes'*.

6. What are the recommendations?

A number of recommendations can be made based on the findings of this research study.

1. Children in foster care should be respected and consulted as experts on their own lives

The current level of participation by children in foster care on issues affecting them is low, which may be attributed to factors such as gaining consent from social workers. The fact that young people who wished to participate in this study were excluded from doing so because they did not have a social worker to provide consent is in direct violation of many of the social inclusion policies for children in Ireland (e.g. National Children's Strategy (2000), National Standards for Children in Foster Care (2003) and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), all of which cover some aspects of respecting the child's right to be heard. In addition to this lack of meaningful participation, infringing on children's rights, there are also negative implications for interventions and treatment approaches for children and young people coming into foster care in the future.

2. Additional training should be provided on the issue of resilience for foster carers, social workers and young people in foster care/leaving foster care

Participants from Phase 1 of the research (foster carers and social workers) expressed frustration at the lack of appropriate accessible training on resilience, despite a strong desire to avail of such training. This should be facilitated as part of the training for social workers and foster carers, and updated on a regular basis. Training and information should also be made available to children and young people themselves in an age-appropriate and inclusive way.

3. There should be a shift from a deficiency model to a more optimistic strengths-based approach to working with children and young people in foster care

Resilience-led practice from an ecological approach has the potential to improve the lives of children and young people in foster care across a variety of areas. In particular, the shift from a deficiency model to a more optimistic focus on strengths, assets and adaptive functioning will bring new momentum to the design and development of preventative and treatment interventions.

The findings of this research study allude to the importance of certain fundamental developmental systems, such as identity formation and internal locus of control, which seem to underpin the manifestation of resilience in children and young people in foster care. Findings such as these may provide a useful paradigm in which to further explore and describe the internal and external attributes and coping processes by which resilience is both developed and enhanced in children. Research using longitudinal and preventative intervention study designs would be useful in determining the causal nature of these results. However, although resilience-based interventions are greatly needed in responding to the challenges faced by children in foster care, the importance of also addressing these issues through public policy changes and community-wide intervention must also be emphasized.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

This study is unique in that it incorporates the views of a variety of stakeholders within the foster care system in Ireland. Through accessing the viewpoints of foster carers, social workers, foster care alumni and, most importantly, children currently in foster care, the research offers a new perspective on the topic of resilience and foster care. The results have direct and practical implications for future foster care practice. The finding, for example, that the adults and the young people often did not agree on either the factors promoting resilience or what constitutes 'successful' or positive outcomes shows that there is a lack of common perceptions among and between the different groups. This difference of opinion suggests that the adults involved in foster care may choose to focus on interventions based on their own perceptions of what enhances resilience, rather than on what the young person needs. The study notes that policies and programmes relating to resilience have focused primarily on adults' perspectives and interpretations. The likelihood of these resilience-enhancing programmes being successful if children do not have the same understanding of the concept is compromised.



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