Resilience for all: a study of classrooms as protective contexts

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Educational resilience has received considerable attention in the literature in the past three decades, with particular reference to indicated and selective interventions. This paper construes resilience within a generalist, universal perspective and examines how classrooms may serve as protective and competence-enhancing contexts for all their students. Various processes, such as caring relationships, active engagement, inclusion, collaboration, positive beliefs and expectations, and recognition, were identified in a naturalist study of Maltese primary school classrooms operating as optimal learning environments. The study suggests that classrooms, which organize themselves as caring, inclusive and learning and pro-social centred communities, may operate as protective and competence-enhancing contexts for all their students.

Keywords: Classroom community; educational resilience; protective processes; socio-emotional competence; universal perspective

Introduction

One of the main developments in the resilience literature has been the shift from the earlier focus on the characteristics of invulnerable children to the study and identification of protective systems in children’s and young persons’ lives. Protective factors refer to assets or resources that moderate or diminish the effects of risk such as social disadvantage or adverse experiences, on negative outcomes. The literature has identified three broad protective factors that help children and young persons exposed to such risks develop into competent and autonomous young adults. These include the dispositional attributes of the individual, affectional ties within the family, and external support systems such as schools, that reward competence and determination and provide caring and support in children’s development (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1988; Masten et al., 1990). This paper focuses on the classroom as one of the external support systems and discusses how classrooms may operate as protective systems in children’s and young persons’ development.

The social context of schooling has been identified as one of the key determinants of resilience in students (Wang & Haertal, 1995; Doll & Lyon, 1998; Pianta &
Walsh, 1998; Pianta, 2001; Dent & Cameron, 2003). Schools and classrooms are a major arena for the social, emotional and cognitive development of students. They are designed to support, nurture and encourage optimal academic and social development in children and young persons, including vulnerable ones. School-related factors are among the most frequently encountered non-family protective factors in the development of vulnerable children and young persons. Caring and nurturing relationships between students and teachers, supportive peer interactions, active student engagement in meaningful activities, and high expectations have been identified as key protective and competence enhancement factors amongst children at risk (Werner & Smith, 1988; Rutter, 1990; Resnick et al., 1997; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Gilligan, 2000; Rees & Bailey, 2003).

A universal perspective of educational resilience

The current studies on educational resilience are predominantly focused on success, particularly academic achievement, in the context of risk, such as threatening or adverse circumstances. Various voices have been arguing for a more positive and proactive construction of educational resilience which includes a universal, generalist perspective, focusing on common processes promoting academic and social competence amongst all children and young persons, including those at risk (Battistisch, 2001; Brown et al., 2001; Cefai, 2004; Carter & Doyle, 2006). Recent research suggests that factors, which benefit children in adversity, such as caring relationships and a meaningful and engaging curriculum, have been found to benefit normally developing, already motivated children (Solomon et al., 1997, 2000). Alternatively, the processes that generally foster competence in development, such as caring relationships and connectedness, operate in adverse circumstances as well, acting as protective factors (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Howard et al., 1999). Cross-curricular and context-focused approaches appear to be more effective in promoting socio-emotional and academic competence than short-term, pull-out, add-on, one-off intervention programmes targeting specific groups (Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Waxman et al., 2004). Programmes such as socio-emotional learning in the USA (Elias & Weissberg, 2000) and the social and emotional aspects of learning and social, emotional and behavioural skills programmes in the UK (DfEE, 2004) are promising frameworks in this respect (see Poulou, 2007). A generalist perspective also avoids the differentiation and specialisation of support that may lead to further stress amongst vulnerable children (Pianta & Walsh, 1998) and to the possibility of stigmatization and labelling of ‘non-resilient’ children (Waxman et al., 2004), with the consequence of schools increasing risk rather than reducing it.

The key assumption underlying the conceptualization of resilience within a generalist, universal perspective, is that resilience building can be done by schools through common contextual processes that promote positive social and academic behaviours amongst normally developing children and young persons as well as those who may be at risk in their development. These processes are grounded in the
typical mechanisms involved in the development of social and academic competence. The experience of schools and classrooms characterized by caring and connectedness, engagement and influence, shared values and positive beliefs, a sense of belonging and a sense of community, have been consistently shown to be related to various positive academic and social outcomes for all students, including those considered at risk of school failure and psychosocial difficulties (Battistisch et al., 1995; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Solomon et al., 1997). Schools and classrooms are thus construed as social systems protecting and supporting the growth and well-being of all, including those children and young persons exposed to various difficulties and risks in their social and cognitive development, such as adverse family and community backgrounds (cf. Lewis, 1999).

There are two main aspects of educational resilience as defined in this study, namely socio-emotional competence and educational engagement at school. Socio-emotional competence refers to age- and context-appropriate social and communicative skills children and young persons use to cultivate relationships with adults and peers to succeed in an environment, such as helping and working collaboratively with peers, as well as autonomy and problem-solving skills. Educational engagement is defined as positive academic attitudes, motivation to achieve and to learn, and enjoyment of class and liking for school. Most of the extant studies define student resilience in terms of single outcomes, usually academic achievement in a single subject. Measuring school success solely on the basis of tests and grades is problematic in various ways. Students may be achieving but still facing considerable problems in social competence, problem solving and autonomous learning (Planta & Walsh, 1998). Moreover, such a conceptualization provides a very limited view of what education is about, reflecting a ‘grammar school’ model of schooling, focusing on teaching and performance rather than on students and learning (Watkins, 2001). It hinders the promotion of students’ development as creative, caring and responsible citizens (Nicholls, 1989) and as competent, self-directed and autonomous learners (Watkins et al., 2002).

**Methodology**

The study sought to examine the processes taking place in a number of Maltese primary school classrooms characterized by optimal learning environments. It aimed at capturing the common contextual processes that ‘work’ in classrooms formed of both at risk (low socio-economic status) and non-at risk students. All the classrooms consisted of students coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The focus of the study was the classrooms themselves rather than individual children. Nine classrooms in three different primary schools from various regions on the island were selected on the basis of a purposely constructed framework. The framework consisted of a questionnaire completed by classroom teachers, tapping on three components of educational resilience as defined in this study, namely student prosocial behaviour in the classroom, autonomy and problem solving, and motivation and engagement in classroom activities. Classroom teachers were asked to complete
the seven items in the questionnaire on each student in their classroom. This paper is concerned with the second part of the study, namely the exploration of the classroom processes, and details on the construction of the framework and the analysis of the data to select the classrooms have already been made available elsewhere (Cefai, 2004).

About six to eight weeks from the start of the scholastic year, all Year 2–4 teachers at the three schools (28 teachers in all) were asked to complete the framework for each of their students. Twenty-two of the teachers returned the completed instruments by the end of the first scholastic term. The three classrooms in each school, which appeared to have the highest levels of student pro-social behaviour, autonomy and problem solving and educational engagement, as perceived by the teachers, were selected for further study. The classes chosen ranged from Year 2 to Year 4 (6–9 years), with an average population of about 20 boys and girls; all teachers were female. All classes were of mixed ability, and students came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, although the exact nature of student intake varied from one classroom to the other. Year 1 classes were not included since students in those classes would have just started attending the school. Students in Years 5 and 6 were also left out to avoid potential contamination of the processes being examined due to streaming on the basis of ability in those classes.

This study was an attempt to find out ‘what actually goes on’ in classes within a particular context through the exploration of the nature of the social phenomena. In seeking to understand these phenomena, it was crucial to study the meaning of experience and behaviour in context and in their full complexity, being close to the actors themselves and making use of methods providing detail, depth, and density (cf. Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Extended participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the classroom teachers and students were the data collection methods used in the study. All teachers and students were relatively unknown to the researcher, who thus started the classroom observations as an outsider. Participant observation was spread across the last five and half months of the scholastic year, with one day per week in each school. The researcher’s role was that of ‘observer as participant’, focused on observations with limited participation. This avoided problems usually associated with extended fieldwork, such as limiting space needed to examine processes without losing perspective of the group or context being studied, while still making it possible to engage in a process of discovery with the participants.

The researcher took a more observant role during teacher explanations and a more active role during class work, helping students in their work. Observation notes were written on a fieldwork journal, which included a description of the activities observed, and reflective comments on those observations. Observation guidelines were developed from the literature and served as a loose framework for observation of the practices, behaviours, relationships and beliefs taking place in the classroom, particularly in the initial stages of data collection. These included amongst others the nature of the communication and relationships between teachers and students and amongst students themselves, the participation of students in the classroom activities, the expectations, beliefs and values of the classroom members, the
classroom management practices, pedagogical strategies, and the promotion of prosocial behaviour.

During the last phase of the study, individual semi-structured interviews were held with the classroom teachers while focus groups were conducted with a small number of students from each class. The interview schedules were developed from the educational resilience literature and, in line with the grounded theory analysis of the study, from the themes that had started to develop from the observations. The questions explored the participants' views on the practices, activities, behaviours, relationships and beliefs taking place in the classroom. The student interview guide explored their thoughts and feelings about the classroom atmosphere, relationships, work, autonomy and influence. The teachers' interview guide explored their perceptions of students’ behaviours, relationships, and engagement as well as their views on the relationships, collegiality and collaboration amongst staff, staff involvement in planning and decision-making, and shared goals.

Analysis of the data commenced early on in the data collection phase, with interweaved data collection and analysis, both processes influencing one another. A three-staged process characterized the analysis, namely an initial attempt to develop categories that illuminated the data; ‘saturating’ these categories with many appropriate cases in order to demonstrate their relevance; and finally developing these categories into a more general analytical framework with relevance to the outside world (Glaser & Straus, 1967). The emerging categories were developed simultaneously from the different classes, and were constantly compared to other examples from the data until the researcher felt confident about their meaning and importance. The observation and interview guidelines helped to keep the data collection focused on particular aspects of the contexts being observed, but without seeking to verify or just fit the data within an existing framework. Such a perspective offered the possibility of changing focus as the ongoing analysis of the rich data suggested.

The first step in the analysis involved establishing descriptive units of analysis of the data and coding them according to the method of data collection (observation/interviews). Each unit of analysis was labelled according to emerging themes and patterns, which consisted of further subdivisions. As the researcher started to focus on the behaviours and practices identified in the observation schedules, particular patterns started to emerge that reflected, went contrary to, or were not included in, the observation framework. Through the constant comparison of data in the same classroom, in other classrooms, and with the interview data, this process was further developed and refined. It became more data driven and inductive as the researcher became more involved with the classes and kept going back to the field.

Whilst acknowledging that it was not realistic to believe that the context was not influenced by his presence, the researcher sought to have as little impact as possible on the situation observed. Indeed the issue was not whether the observer affected what was being observed, but to be aware of such effects, monitor them and take them into consideration during data analysis. Efforts to minimize the observer’s effect included building a rapport with the participants, becoming a part of the crowd, and seeking to be as non-disruptive of the natural activities and behaviours in
the classrooms as possible. Other strategies to ensure dependability and fidelity during data collection and analysis included prolonged engagement and persistent observations in the field, being clear and rigorous in the procedures used, making use of regular reflexive field notes, being public about own position and stance, and seeking alternative explanations and themes which did not simply reinforce existing theoretical positions.

Results

A number of processes emerged from the study of the relationships, behaviours, practices and beliefs in the classroom contexts. These have been grouped according to six key processes, namely sense of classroom belonging and connectedness, inclusion, active engagement and collaboration in learning, positive beliefs and expectations, and recognition. These findings have been developed from the observations carried out in the classrooms and supported by what the classroom members themselves had to say.

**Sense of classroom belonging and connectedness**

The students in the study appeared connected and affiliated to each other and to their teachers. They felt physically and emotionally safe in an environment where they trusted rather than feared each other, and where interpersonal relationships were salient features of their contexts. They spoke highly of their group and their teachers, expressing pride and a sense of ownership in their class: ‘We are happy here, they take good care of us’, ‘We love her (teacher) and she loves us’, and ‘I feel that children here are one family’. A powerful statement on the sense of classroom belonging was made by the following group of students:

> The most beautiful thing we have in our class is that we are united together, we have each other, we love each other, we agree with each other, and we work and learn from each other.

During classroom activities as well as during play, frequent episodes were observed of caring and supportive behaviour amongst the students, such as taking an active interest in each other’s work and helping each other. Teachers and students themselves referred to a ‘classroom norm’ of students helping each other with work: ‘We share between us … we help each other to finish work … when somebody does not know something, we tell him or her “keep studying and you will learn it” ’. Small group work activities, when held, were usually characterized by helping, sharing and collaborative behaviours, with few instances of telling on others, arguing or fighting. Similarly, during the break time, few instances of misbehaviour were observed, and in various instances, it was ensured all students were included during play.

Teachers’ care was expressed through their attention and support to students during lessons, their preparation and dedication, their positive behaviour management, their satisfaction and pride in students’ work and effort, and their repeated efforts to ensure student understanding and learning. They frequently went near the
students as they were working, listened and validated students’ interventions, and encouraged them to share their experiences. In most instances, they adopted a child-centred approach, seeking to enhance students’ learning within a caring framework, emphasizing students’ overall well being, and the need to know students well. As one teacher remarked, ‘what is important is that students enjoy coming to school, that their basic needs are addressed, we all agree on this issue and we do our utmost to address it’. Another remarked:

On my part I try to create an atmosphere like home … I give priority to respect towards teacher, but not to the distance between us … I joke with the kids as if they were my brothers and sisters or my cousins … we share aspects of our lives.…

Inclusion

The nine classes were characterized by a broad range of abilities, interests and backgrounds, all classes being mixed ability groups. The teachers sought to cater for this diversity, including all students in their group during explanations, academic tasks and social activities. They made time for students who needed help in understanding or completing work, making use of individual attention as necessary. One of the most evident indicators of inclusive practice was the support provided to students with learning difficulties. This varied from individual attention and peer tutoring to more intensive support by complementary teachers and facilitators. Teachers communicated the belief, both explicitly and implicitly, that all students could learn and that they would be supported to do so. Although some remarked that students’ needs were related to factors such as limited skills, social problems or socio-economic background, in the great majority of instances they believed that they could address such needs and assumed responsibility for helping students succeed. This reflected the classrooms’ definition as one in which everybody’s needs were attended to: ‘for me it is very important that we work all together, everybody, no distinction between good and weak’.

Teachers also sought to engage students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in their classrooms. Various episodes were observed of teachers acting as ‘therapeutic agents’ supporting students ‘in need of rescue’ from various difficulties. One teacher remarked that she sought to include students with challenging behaviour by giving them roles and responsibilities and by building a caring relationship with them. On various occasions, she sought to engage such students in the lesson, asking them questions, listening to their views, and rewarding their participation and effort. Another teacher described how she sought to avoid labelling and consequent exclusion, by giving each student a chance whatever his/her behaviour in the previous year:

I don’t like the practice of consulting last year’s teacher to identify potential troublemakers…. I believe you should give each pupil a fair chance without being prejudiced … for instance one pupil who was bullying others last year is really doing well this year, and it was good I did not know about his behaviour.

The evidence from this study suggested that the teachers sought to provide care and support to all their students, with little evidence of differential treatment.

Resilience for all
Although various studies suggest that teachers tend to prefer students who are academically competent and engaged and avoid those who are perceived less capable or less engaged (e.g. Wentzel & Asher, 1995), this was not evident in these classrooms. All students in the classrooms were welcomed and teachers provided extra attention and resources to students in difficulty.

**Active engagement and collaboration**

The classrooms in this study served as friendly, engaging and diverse learning environments, with instructional arrangements facilitating active participation and interactions amongst students. There were frequent instances of student-centred and activity-based instructional strategies, teachers drawing on students’ interests and experiences and incorporating resources from students’ own environment in seeking to connect the pedagogy to their lives. One teacher explained:

> Although I prepare work beforehand, I do a lot of spontaneous teaching and activities according to the situation. I prefer to go with the flow of the children, using spontaneous and creative improvisation ... and I take ideas from children themselves because sometimes children teach you themselves.

Students were highly engaged in the activities observed. As one student put it, ‘everybody participates, everybody enjoys it, nobody is bored ...’. They had frequent opportunities to learn through active, enjoyable and collaborative activities, feeding into a virtual cycle of enthusiasm, engagement and accomplishment. In one lesson, for instance, the teacher made frequent use of a ‘resident’ puppet that was cracking jokes all the time. The interpersonal nature of the classroom climate and activities also helped to make learning an enjoyable enterprise. In many instances, learning was fun, provoked by ‘humanity reflecting’ teachers (Oldfather, 1993) and fun-loving pupils.

Various episodes of collaborative learning were observed, with students building knowledge together in small or whole groups. It was a norm in most of the classes that during written work, students shared and helped each other in their work, particularly those sitting next to them. Even if the nature of the exercise was individual, in many instances students could still work together with the other members of the group or their partner: ‘when there is something I don’t know, I ask my friends for help, and when they don’t know anything I also help them ... I like it when we help each other...’. An interesting episode was when a student told a peer in another group that her group had already finished. A boy replied ‘We are not competing here!’ and the teacher remarked, ‘That’s right! What is important is that we do our work correctly!’ Indeed collaborative learning is not only about students working together, but doing so in a helpful and collaborative way.

However, students had little voice and choice in what they were taught and how it was taught and evaluated, and in how they were expected to behave. There were few instances where they were asked about their views, except for the occasional lightweight consultation such as how to spend the ‘extra time’ once finished with their work. Most teachers believed that students were still too young to participate in
decision-making, though some remarked that they included students by taking their views on issues of behaviour and on what activities they liked or did not like. Although there were a number of episodes where teachers encouraged students to work on their own and to take their own initiative in completing academic tasks, in general most students appeared to be highly dependent on their teachers and to a lesser extent on their peers in their learning. The following remark by one of the teachers serves to illustrate this point:

When they come to us in Year 4 … they would have lost a lot of their individuality … they are used to do what they are told, to a way of working which has eroded their individuality … as if I am teaching one photocopy of another.

The collaborative stance in the classrooms was also evident amongst the class teachers themselves, particularly amongst same year teachers. In contrast to the autonomy and privacy typical of traditional primary school teachers, the doors of most of the classrooms observed were ‘open’ most of the time with frequent interactions and consultations. This was particularly true of same year teachers, with teachers frequently consulting each other on schemes of work, use of resources, behaviour issues, and other matters. The staff underlined the value they placed on collaboration and their belief that they could be more effective if they worked as a team:

We know each other very well … this helps us a lot in our work because it means that we are working as friends not competing against each other. We also support each other with problems we may have with students … and thus we understand each other’s problems and help each other with them.

The practice of year group teaching at one of the schools was another good example of staff collectivity. The sense of teamwork, synchronicity, and mutuality was very evident during various observation sessions as well as in the following comment by a class teacher:

Working with the other teachers in Year 4 was one of my best years, working together as a team sharing and exchanging material … we keep close contact with each other all the time … we adjust the lessons together to make sure we work in synchronicity … we fit like a jigsaw puzzle in our work … it worked out really well both for us and for our students….

Positive beliefs and expectations

A common belief shared by most classroom teachers was that their students could learn and achieve if they (students) worked hard enough. They believed that they and the school were instrumental in bringing about effective change in the children entrusted to them, even if such children were coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The common expectation amongst teachers was that all students had the potential to succeed, each according to his or her ability, reflecting the value of success for all evident in the classrooms. Teachers sought to raise expectations by affirming their belief in the students’ abilities and skills, instilling hope and belief amongst students. One teacher remarked loudly that her group was very advanced
and that the topics being covered were previously included in the secondary school curriculum. Another frequently reminded the students how ‘smart’ they were: ‘I always try to tell them that they are good and able pupils, that this is the best school, to keep the image of themselves as the best students…’. The following excerpt describes how one teacher sought to instil belief and hope in students even in the face of failure:

When they come to Year 4 they are already set and some have already given up. They have a hard struggle to unlearn what they had learnt, that they are not good, this is one of the battles I have….

This resonates with what one student said and underlines the motivational value of teachers’ optimistic belief in students’ potential to succeed, attributing success to effort and failure to external factors:

One of the things teacher tells us all the time is to try things out, not to give up, she says, ‘If there is a difficult sum, we have to win not the sum, we must not be afraid, we have to use our brains’….

Recognition

The celebration of students’ effort and success, at both individual and group levels, was a common practice in the classrooms. Praise, exhibition of work, reading work to others, notes to administration and parents, and tangible rewards, were frequently observed in the classrooms. Many of the classrooms were indeed a showcase of students’ work and artefacts. Occasionally students were encouraged to organize class exhibitions for the whole school, to publish their work in newsletters, and to demonstrate and celebrate their talents during concerts and performances. The teachers also ensured that all students received recognition for their effort. In most of the classes, there were no losers, competition was discouraged, recognition was also awarded for effort, and students were encouraged to help each other succeed. In contrast to highly competitive and individualistic structures, the caring, inclusive, collaborative and learning-centred contexts made it possible for all students to receive recognition for their efforts, accomplishments and improvement. One student remarked:

We did an exhibition … and we went to show it to the Head and she was pleased with us, and we congratulated each other, and I was also happy that the others did something nice as well.

Discussion

The evidence strongly suggested that to varying degrees, the classrooms in this study operated as open, caring, inclusive and engaging learning environments, with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, mutual care and support, active participation, and collaborative learning experiences. They were characterized by a sense of belonging and connectedness, a culture where all members were included and provided with opportunities to succeed, caring relationships amongst the various members, and pro-social student behaviour. They were also marked by positive
academic behaviours and beliefs, such as student commitment, engagement in meaningful activities, collaboration with peers, and positive beliefs and expectations. However, students had a very limited say in the decisions made in the classroom. They were also still heavily dependent on their teachers in their learning, with limited opportunities for independent and self-reliant learning.

The classroom contexts described above were highly resonant of caring communities, with members forming part of a common caring house (Goodenow, 1993a, b; Solomon et al., 2000; Waxman et al., 2004). Students experienced contexts marked by a sense of belonging, connectedness, engagement, collaboration, and a focus on learning and pro-social behaviour (cf. Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1994; Battistich et al., 1995). Other processes such as positive beliefs and expectations, inclusion, and recognition of effort and achievement, have also been found to connect members together, increase shared responsibility and interdependence, and consequently serve as a source of sustenance for the functioning of the classrooms as caring communities (Roeser et al., 1996; Pianta, 1997; Wentzel, 1997; Watkins, 2001). Various studies show that students with a sense of belonging and community, including students considered at risk, are more likely to develop and engage in positive academic attitudes and behaviours, to engage in pro-social and collaborative behaviours, and to have a sense of competence and responsibility (Solomon et al., 1992; Wang & Haertel, 1995; Battistich et al., 1997). This process takes place because of the satisfaction of students’ basic psychological needs. This contributes to their active engagement in the learning process and in the life of the classroom, which in turn leads to achievement and to socio-emotional competence (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Students who have the opportunity to understand through direct experience the values of caring, inclusion, and solidarity, who practice the collaborative and pro-social behaviours embedded in the shared values and beliefs within a safe and supportive environment, and who see other members of the group engaged in these practices, are strongly motivated to engage in such behaviours themselves. They are more likely to respect and care for their peers and teachers, to share and learn together rather than to compete with each other, to value others and their achievements, and to include others in their play and in their work. They are likely to develop positive attitudes and behaviours towards learning and become more committed and self-efficacious (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Battistich et al., 1995). Given that the primary values in the Maltese classrooms were related to care, collaboration, inclusion, and pro-social behaviour, student behaviour was more likely to be informed by those very values.

Classroom communities characterized by caring relationships, meaningful participation, collaboration, high expectations and shared norms, have been identified in other contexts as contributing to educational resilience (Goodenow, 1993a, b; Solomon et al., 1997, 2000; Battistish et al., 1999). The way the classrooms in this study operated, however, provided further understandings on the processes underlying such contexts. First, while teacher support and care may have the most direct impact on students’ behaviour, peer relationships contribute in a different but complementary way to the psychosocial climate in the classroom and to
students’ learning, motivation and behaviour (Wenztel, 1998; Osterman, 2000). This study underlined the culture of peer support in both academic and social activities. In this respect, peer support may not just be a consequence but also an indicator of that context. Second, the strong culture of inclusion that characterized the Maltese contexts, contrasted with the exclusive nature of strong communities focused on achievement, where an increased sense of belonging for some students may result in the exclusion of other students, particularly new, weak or ‘different’ members (Anderman, 2002). The contexts in this study shared values and norms related to students’ learning and well-being, to inclusive education and success for all, where all had the opportunity to be successful in learning. Third, teaching and learning were characterized by activities and instructional practices that were authentic, experiential, and enjoyable. Besides the need for affiliation, autonomy and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), children need to satisfy their need for fun through their learning experiences in the classroom (Glaser, 1990). While in the secondary school, being influential may be a more critical factor in participation than fun, in the primary school the need for stimulating and enjoyable activities may be as important as, if not more than, the need for autonomy.

Fourth, and finally, the relative lack of democracy and autonomy conflicted with the international literature, which underlined the need for student autonomy as a prerequisite for positive outcomes such as motivation, engagement and social competence (Solomon et al., 1992; Manke, 1997; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). It is likely that other salient processes such as caring teachers, supportive peers, cooperative and inclusive practices, and the focus on learning and pro-social behaviour, might have outweighed the negative impact of lack of autonomy. Relatedness is particularly important in primary schools. It may not only generate a feeling of autonomy and influence (Wentzel, 1997), but it has a stronger relationship with positive student outcomes than autonomy (Osterman, 2000).

Conclusion

The findings of the study are suggestive that classrooms are more likely to operate as protective and competence-enhancing contexts for their students, including those at risk, when they function as caring, inclusive and pro-social, and learning-centred communities. Processes such as sense of belonging and connectedness, caring relationships, inclusion, active engagement and collaboration, a focus on learning and pro-social behaviour, positive beliefs and expectations, and recognition, were characteristic of classrooms where students, including vulnerable ones, were actively engaged in the learning process and exhibited socio-emotional competence. The nature and design of this study, however, do not make it possible to claim that student behaviour was the result of the classroom processes observed. Further case studies, as well as longitudinal prevention studies, would serve to evaluate and develop the findings and suggestions presented here, and contribute towards a better understanding and stronger conceptualization of classrooms as protective and competence-enhancing communities for all their students, including vulnerable ones.
This study was concerned with ‘what works’ in classrooms made up of students coming from diverse backgrounds and socio-economic groups, and how classrooms may be organized in such a way as to protect vulnerable students and promote their, and other students’, development. The generalist, universal perspective proposed in the study does not seek to substitute educational resilience studies focused on children and young persons at risk. Rather it is suggested that the study of educational resilience stands to benefit from a parallel and complementary generalist perspective, which seeks to integrate competence- and resilience-enhancing processes into the mainstream daily life of the classroom. Instead of merely serving as the location of intervention programmes, classrooms need to organize themselves to provide protective and positive experiences for all their students as an integral part of their daily activities. When they operate as caring, inclusive and learning, and pro-social focused communities, classrooms may be providing such an experience for their students.

Note

1. Malta is a small island state in the central Mediterranean Sea, just south of Sicily and about 200 km north of North Africa, with a population of about 400,000. The population density of 1,282 per square kilometre is by far the highest in the EU, and one of the highest in the world. It has been part of the European Union since 2004. There are relatively low levels of regional, cultural or ethnic divisions, although particular regions such as the Inner Harbour Area are considered relatively socio-economically disadvantaged. The official languages are Maltese and English. The native Maltese language is a Semitic tongue written in the Latin alphabet, with strong Italian influence. English is spoken and written widely in Malta, and it is taught from the first year in the primary school. Education is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 16 years.

References


