

Why resilience matters for schools trying to thrive in tough situations

By Liesel Ebersöhn

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Many schools in Southern Africa are functioning in tough situations. Poverty, a lack of resources and poor or non-existent basic services all combine to make a less than ideal environment for education. But a number of schools in Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho and South Africa display incredible resilience - a concept steeped in indigenous knowledge systems.

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The Conversation Africa's education editor Natasha Joseph asked Professor Liesel Ebersöhn to explain the role of resilience in education.

What is “resilience”, in an educational setting?

Resilience in schools involves a process where teachers, principals, families, students and district officials know and use strategies that help teachers to teach and students to learn.

Resilience becomes relevant in education as soon as there is a shock to the education system that requires intervention. After that shock, resilience can ensure better than projected outcomes for students and teachers.

In a postcolonial, transforming society – like [highly unequal](#) South Africa – such “shocks” or challenges are chronic. They don’t let up. They are also cumulative, coming from a variety of fronts.

In South Africa these barriers include a limited number of trained teachers; an unreliable supply of teaching materials; and multilingualism – either teachers and pupils don’t share home languages, or they do but converse only in English for the purpose of teaching and learning.

School systems, in conjunction with health and welfare systems, may not be responsive enough to identify pupils who are vulnerable because of health or socio-economic needs. Even if they can, the services available might be really limited. A lack of physical infrastructure like buildings, electricity, water and sanitation in schools limits opportunities for teachers to teach, and for students to learn and develop.

Schools that have supportive strategies in place can offer buffers. They can promote positive outcomes – for pupils and teachers.

Can you tell us about a school in southern Africa whose resilience is allowing it to flourish? How does that resilience manifest itself?

I've conducted research in rural Swaziland and Lesotho, urban Namibia and four of South Africa's nine provinces around school-community resilience.

At many of the schools I visited that are functioning in challenging contexts, teachers draw on their cultural heritage – their indigenous knowledge systems – to provide care and support. This promotes resilience.

Teachers in these schools don't go into "fight or flight" mode in response to the sorts of shocks I've described. They flock together. They tap into each other's relationships to access and use available resources. For instance, I met a primary school teacher in an Eastern Cape informal settlement who asked a relative to connect her to a friend working as a nurse at the neighbourhood clinic. Now when the teacher sees that a child is sick she doesn't feel helpless or frustrated: she calls the nurse directly and refers that child and family for health care.

In cases where teachers suspect a family may require financial support they can refer them to their "insider" link; someone who can help with identifying and completing the necessary forms. It can be hard for families with high rates of illiteracy to access the help they need, so these connections are vital.

So the flocking starts with an identified problem. Then teachers think about which resources they need to address this need, and who could connect them with a person who's a custodian of this resource or service. In this way a network is created. Its purpose is to pragmatically access resources.

What they're doing fits into a theory in indigenous knowledge systems that's called [Relationship Resourced Resilience](#). This explains how individuals connect in times of hardship to share limited resources. They do so by providing social support to one another with positive outcomes for the collective, not only the individual.

This resilience response is robust. It continues to be used in urban and rural settings, by elders and young people, as well as men and women.

What is it that these schools are doing differently?

Schools that are able to show resilience are those that tap into age-old practices. These have stood the test of time and the absence of formal, policy-level structures to provide social support.

This social support is relational, collective and pragmatic. Teachers use existing relationships to tap into resources. For

example, they might use reciprocal donations. These are in the form of skills in exchange for money, or for goods like food, or shared savings in societies to provide funds for school uniforms, or festivities, or transport. The cultural use of relationships is aimed at collective buffering against shocks and ultimately collective well-being.

Are there obvious and visible differences in these schools' results?

The positive outcomes that have [been measured](#) relate to resilient school communities' subjective health and well-being documented over a ten-year time frame with teachers and students in primary and secondary schools, and in urban and rural schools.

At these schools, teachers continue to show up, teach and support each and their students. Parents and caregivers bring their children to schools that follow this resilience formula: research [shows](#) that such schools have higher enrolment numbers, which means they get more government funding for teacher posts and so enjoy lower student-teacher ratios.

Parents, caregivers and school-community volunteers offer their services to such schools. They assist with cultivating gardens to supplement the school nutrition programme. They follow up on students who don't attend school and encourage them to return, and participate in after-school programmes that provide well-being and development opportunities for young people to engage in arts, culture, sports, and homework.

Neighbourhood businesses link with such schools to provide computers for teacher professional development and student training. They provide funds for counselling centres, books for libraries and jungle gyms for crucial development through play.

What lessons can be taken from your research?

Social support is an indigenous knowledge system in southern Africa. It has been used over time to combat challenges and compensate for the absence of equal services. It has also been used to access available opportunities, and connect people to adaptive pathways. It is a strategy that promotes positive outcomes for many even amid ongoing scarcity. It has been refined and has proven to be robust as a response to shocks. Social support is used organically in some schools – even in the absence of formal intervention.

In other schools that are struggling to adapt to ever-present hardships, systematic interventions grafted onto existing indigenous knowledge about social support [could promote resilience](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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