Resilience and Disadvantage in Education - A Sociological View[1]

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Abstract

This study examines the question of how the breaking of an individual from the unfavourable socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions can be explained. The concept of resilience, its ecological and psychological use is reviewed through international scientific literature and examines its possible use in the sociology of education. Finally, it introduces Hungarian studies that can help clarify this process by understanding resilience.

Keywords: disadvantage, resilience, ecology, success

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Introduction

If a researcher deals with disadvantaged people, they will inevitably face the question why a member of the group cannot break out. Since it is not about the advancement of a group but the individual, the well-known, general examination factors of sociology are of little help. Over time, from the viewpoint of sociology, a particular social group will necessarily remain at the same low or same high level; the children of such groups can only advance to a higher level of their own in very small steps, sometimes over a generation.

If a child leaves a birth or education group, they might establish a different career path in comparison with what may have been expected by the situation of the family or the level of education. Based on an analysis made earlier with young people that were raised in state institutes (Forray, 2003) I came to a conclusion that as a result of an outstanding individual performance merged with pure luck, some might gain a significantly higher education and qualification compared to the average standards. They can escape from their own social environment and, according to my former idea, start a successful career. This might occur due to a "Janissary training"-type education, however, it is unpredictable and the personal costs are also very high. These young adults feel that emotionally and, consequently, sociologically they do not belong anywhere because they do not have family ties. The simile that has been used as a historical parallel also indicates a feeling that in their case they were "disposable" after being used for literally any purpose. In these situations, we can think of an educational environment in which deeper personal relationships or inherited styles played a minor role (Forray, 2003). However, even then I sensed that this explanation is only applicable to a case of a juvenile with a similar fate, and even so, it is not quite satisfactory, as specific educational effects and specific personal endowments or ambitions also play a role.

In what follows we examine the question of what general regularities can be found in those cases when an individual or a community becomes capable of achieving a higher level of development than one might expect from sociologically disadvantageous conditions. It may apply not only to the career of an individual but also a community such as a settlement and its inhabitants. In this overview I apply a less frequently used academic approach to examine similar topics: resilience. I believe that such an approach can be really useful in the field of educational sociology. I reviewed the relevant literature and urge the readers to interpret their questions and consequences.

The concept of resilience

Resilience has become the subject of intense research in many fields of science in the past decades, its role being greatest in ecology and psychology. To a superficial observer it might appear that there is hardly a common ground between the two disciplines: one observes the living environment, the other observes the internal processes of an individual. At a second glance, we can find similarities between them, I will explain it below. We can conclude that the turn of the decade the number of publications about

resilience has been increasing dramatically, as can be proven by any search engine (I did some research using Google). The same approach has been used in educational sociology recently, albeit not necessarily specified by the authors.

Resilience in general means the capability of flexible resistance, i.e. the capacity of an individual, group or community, ecosystem or material to adapt successfully to extreme or shocking conditions. In psychology, where the term has already been in use before educational sociology, it is defined as an individual's ability to regain their well-being in the face of stress, disturbance and trauma. Educational sociology adds the interpretation of spontaneous and purposeful educational tools, in particular the impact of the school, teachers, fellow students and supporting organizations.

Resilience is a key to survival and long-term viability; in other words, success despite difficulties. This approach is emphasised in the definition of the International Resilience Project: 'a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity' (Grotberg, 1999). According to another definition, resilience is 'the ability of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure' (Walker-Salt, 2006). If approached in this way, it is easy to see that resilience is a form of behaviour that can be interpreted in a wide-ranging fashion.

Nowadays we can meet the term "resilience" in more and more disciplines, which is promising in terms of the innovative approach to this important phenomenon in education and developmental psychology, family therapy and in particular, ecology. Perhaps there is some truth in the statement that the definition, originally used in physics, has grown viral and now belongs to a top-talk category. The ability of flexible resistance, that is to say, the capacity of renewal of a system – an individual, group or community, an ecosystem or a type of material – means that it could successfully adapt to drastic or even shocking disturbance. C. S. Holling (1986), the initiator of resilience research was the first to point out some paradoxes between

- – - efficiency and persistence,
- – - stability and changing, and
- – - predictability or unpredictability of a system.

"Stable" systems are also capable of renewal if facing unforeseen challenges. Resilience is a new framework, a paradigm, with a focus on how complex systems can maintain themselves and their function in the event of a serious malfunction. It is easy to understand that this framework can be successfully used in several fields.

The examined systems may be of many kinds within the framework of nature, society, the individual, a group or a community and a large social system.

In recent years research has outlined the main features of resilient social-ecological systems. Some of the most important of these features are diversity (variety, interaction),

redundancy (cross-border mechanisms that guarantee the safety of operation) and fluctuation (the natural possibility of changing). It is clear that these features can refer to both the individual and the societal groups.

The prevalent concept in resilience psychology assumes that person inextricably interacts with their natural and social environment (Szokolszky et al, 2015). Hupersonsocieties are an integral part of the ecosphere and the complex natural and social systems evolve and cope with the effects. The individual is embedded into the system, the limits and possibilities of their activities are represented by them.

When this concept is considered at the individual's level, e.g. you want to check for a successful adaptation psychology, social psychology or educational sociology sense, it should be emphasized that it is not some "mentally strong" individual's abilities, but also a significant human and social phenomenon (Masten, 2001). Studies have pointed out a number of features in addition to the individual, especially the importance of the contact-type factor. These factors include the following aspects:

a. Parental and relationship characteristics: strong relationship with one or more parents, effective socialization by the parents, relationship with other supportive adults or mentors, contacts with supportive partners. These conditions include the determining actors in the social network of a growing child or young person. So when a child/young person is examined, this should also include those persons that play or are supposed to play a supporting role.

b. Individual differences: intelligence, self-regulation skills, positive attitudes and life goals, abilities, and other characteristics. All these attributes taken into account can show on the one hand what individual properties or characteristics can be expected from a successfully integrating person, and on the other hand, also emphasize the direction of use of the educational and support assets.

c. Community relations: an effective school, opportunities to unfolding personality values, safe and well-organized living environment, contact with social organizations and groups, adequate socio-economic situation. These conditions go beyond the school; the residential environment stresses the importance of the available social and cultural opportunities. (Masten, 1999).

Researchers of the topic consider two fundamental criteria to define resilience when starting out from the social-psychological interpretation:

- - the person is doing well in life in spite of difficulties
- - he/she is/was exposed to a significant risk or difficulty now or earlier.

These two criteria accurately summarize which individual fates indicate resilience when we interpret the results of any research.

In this context we cannot talk about resilience if the person is not exposed to risk or if they are not able to effectively adapt and thrive. Resilience has no permanence in time: most likely no one has any need or possibility to perform well at every moment of their

lives, despite the difficulties. In this way, resilience cannot serve to fully describe a person or group, but in certain situations or at times it can be the most important characteristic. That is, in situations where difficulties should be overcome.

In fact, similar ecological situations can also be studied. Here a basic unit means an entity that not only includes a single organism, but a medium which maintains a system or a network of organisms. The reductionist version of an ecological approach chooses an organic system that serves as a basic unit and considers it's environment with which the unit maintains communication – an external object that can (or should) be exempted from examination during the research. The basic unit is therefore, in this respect, homogeneous, and we do not examine its internal composition. The more powerful version is more radical: the basic unit of the ecological research forms a "cohabiting pattern" with its environment that responds to the impacts on a system by rearranging its internal relationships. The basic unit is therefore an "ecotope" or even an "ecotope field". In this context, only in principle, and from the purpose of the examination can the system and the effect be isolated, so the examination can be carried out as a complex whole. I think the latter interpretation – which examines the environment together with the effects of the development – suits towards becoming a framework of interpretation also in social education research.

Ecosystems and social systems, in general functions, structures and preservation of information may be called such systems. Which systems can be considered resilient and which cannot? Ecology gives us the following guidelines (Lanyi, 2013).

a. The smaller independently functioning units the system is made of, the more resilient it is. Resilience is strengthening, if the material flow cycles form closed-loop processes within a smaller space and time. This could be the ability to self-sufficiency, own waste processing and similar other processes. The thing we can learn about the ongoing climate change is birds that migrate to a greater distance or trees of a longer life cycle are more vulnerable than their fellows in a smaller space or on a smaller time scale.

b. The generalist survives great changes more easily because excessive specialization makes vulnerable. This rule is called the principle or "risk-sharing" or "diversification".

c. In periods of great changes, complexity reduces and, in fact minimizes; over-specialized players and institutions are eliminated, the number of the potential roles and relationships decrease, the accumulated information will be lost.

But how can this former approach, directed to the individual's behaviour, be connected with the latter one? The resilience of an individual in an ecological aspect does not arise from the individual alone. It is a relative concept in which the combination of the inherited biological and psychological conditions and environmental factors (such as family structure, language, socio-cultural determinism and environmental conditions) trigger the adaptive response and determine the current extent of the resilience, the ability of coping with the "mandatory drama". In such an approach, the person or the group can be

described only in conjunction with its environment, and there are no two identical cases. The "unpredictability" just means that it is about the events of a system whose conditions may vary in relation to one another or together to the environment, so the expected reaction – at least from the observer's point of view – cannot be calculated.

If we have a look at the main characteristics of the ecosystem, we can place the individual's behaviour in it. We conclude that the individual and collective behaviours, within their ability to cope with the difficulties, can be interpreted within different schemes, depending on what aspect is chosen. Success can mean social integration of the individual in spite of the difficulties; it can mean a greater or lesser social medium's ability to hold grounds against threats. All in all, whether individual or community behaviour is examined, resilience basically means the same thing: successfully coping with difficulties. Empirical research in educational sociology explores the threatening or serious adverse circumstances in the lives of children or young people, or from other aspects of educational organizations, and how the individual or the organization can cope with them.

Researching resilience in educational sociology

It should also be noted, however, that in educational sociology the use of the term is not very common. It can be concluded that - as indicated in the introduction of the chapter - we can mainly encounter this concept in the geographical society (ecology) and psychological researches. Its educational sociological aspects, the above cited Transylvanian Society Journal – issue no. 3, 2015 – deals with. It is remarkable that we can encounter the concept in the scientific publications of University of Debrecen doctoral school of pedagogy, as I refer to their publications. The reasons may be explained with a close contact to the Transylvanian society, especially to the scientific society.

Some resilience experts consider schools as the developers of the adaptation mechanisms (Masten et al., 2008). It is explained that school is a place where not only support but also risk factors are present. Disadvantaged or at risk school children constitute a supportive environment in which coping strategies to comply with the difficulties can be developed (Cegledi, 2012). This interpretation can be an explanation to the question, not yet answered by educational sociology, why certain disadvantaged children and young people with unusual success in school and career motivations, decisions cannot be foreseen, at least from the point of view of an observer.

Earlier, in our own research (Forray 1988; Forray, Kozma, 2011) we tried to understand a successful careers of young people from disadvantaged families with a geo-sociologically underprivileged background by relying on an ecological approach that had not yet been applied in educational sociology at the time. We observed that if a disadvantaged young person finds someone in their own environment – i.e. a teacher, a porter or the doctor in the village – whose example or their caring can help develop a significantly higher level of motivation in the young person's career choices. The environment in these cases was examined as a combination of organizations including the

participants. Not knowing other explanation we reasoned the existence of influence could only be regarded as a coincidence. Although essentially this explanation can still be considered valid, we did not interpret it from the perspective of the young person involved. We considered the links to be the most unpredictable factors of the ecological environment that had an impact on life courses, and we did not apply the concept of resilience.

In recent years, research in educational sociology in the Hungarian language area has embraced the concept of resilience. The Transylvanian Society dedicated an entire edition to a similar research. Mate (2015) wrote about Gypsy youngsters, examining how the rise of some young people from an environment of multiple disadvantages can be explained.

An empirical research project published in Review of Sociology (Cegledi, 2012) analysed successful school careers achieved despite the disadvantages by using the resilience concept. Homoki (2014) wrote his thesis about special needs children's groups and child protection. Mention should be made of the study by Rayman and Varga (2015), which compared the courses of life in higher education of disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma students and interpreted the successful lives in the light of resilience. The reason why resilience requires special attention is because it is put into context with inclusion, and it examines the personal characteristics together with the behaviour of the responsible institute. We also analysed the pathways of Gypsy youths in higher education in the same theoretical context (Forray 2015).

The above examples examine the outbreak from the disadvantaged situation based on the theory of resilience. Another angle of research is to explore the theoretical context in which we can evaluate the significantly diverse course of towns with similar capabilities in socially disadvantaged areas can also be examined (Forray, Kozma, 2013; Forray, Kozma, 2014; Kozma, Forray 2015). We wondered whether there were any resilient settlements among those examined. We found that in some cases, a resilient attitude was there among the leaders of the village that gave a boost to appropriate development and investment. Elsewhere, the leaders of the secondary school encouraged the ever spreading changes. It has also been observed that where resilient behaviours only appear sporadically instead of a coordinated way, the community is characterized by stagnation. It seems that a complex system – a community, for example – will only be able to start developing if its leaders can face the adverse potentials in an innovative fashion and try to move forward by finding adequate pathways. For this route, at least in a small village, the teachers of the schools can provide the most help.

Summary

The aim of the study was to demonstrate resilience in (Hungarian) educational sociology, a concept still relatively rarely used these days. I believe that this offers an opportunity to interpret this concept still relatively few researchers have adopted. Rayman and Varga (2015) presented an exciting possibility of this interpretation completed from a

psychological point of view. Attention should be paid to the initial starting point of two lines of educational research well suited for this concept: the regional characteristics, advantages and disadvantages in the description, and the interpretation of familial determinations or the ways to overcome them. In the presentation I attempted to give an overview of the psychological interpretation, since this aspect is often effective and can be combined with other approaches of educational sociology.

Finally, I want to emphasize a single, nevertheless important aspect. Social research, and in general research with a sociological approach, seems focus on failure or imperfection. Not asking how to solve a serious problem, but how severe the problem is. I think it is high time to give emphasis to the question how to solve the problem. What do other people do, and what should I do to solve the problem? This is perhaps the most important output of the research on resilience.

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