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Psychological Resilience, Child participation and Inner Trust

in the context of providing
sustainable wellbeing

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I INTRODUCTION

“Our most empowering moments often arise after our most difficult setbacks.”

-Ryan Biddulph

The question about child wellbeing and especially about sustainable wellbeing is an urgent and actual question to be asked. This article is trying to build a theoretical bridge from the fundamental terms of wellbeing to the central goals of sustainability. This bridge needs to be built with materials that share a lifelong developmental baseline with essential character of ongoing process. Only by addressing coherent theoretical baseline we can actually start building a strong practical fieldwork for the wellbeing of the children.

United Nation’s Convention of the Child Rights (1989) was built on the ideal approach of human development, where the basis of human being is being seen through a holistic approach and where the perspective of human being is being stated as a causal complexity. The most common components of defining wellbeing include: positive affect (an emotional component), resilience (a coping component), perceived satisfaction with relationships and other of child’s life (a cognitive component) and effective functioning or the maximizing of child’s potential (a performance component).¹ Thus, child wellbeing is measured to be more than just material resources or legal obligation – it is about the physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing, where subjective wellbeing has been described as the perception that child’s life is going well. Also subjective wellbeing can be seen as “flourishing”, which is a combination of functioning effectively and feeling good about themselves.² After these definitions it is quite clear, that wellbeing cannot be clarified without a subjective opinion of the child him/herself. Several researchers are suggesting, that people’s subjective perceptions of satisfaction are even better indicators of wellbeing than the traditional indicators, for example the level of physical health or their safety in their community.³ Thus, we certainly

¹ McGrath & Noble 2012, p.17-18.

² Huppert & So 2009.

³ Diener & Seligman 2004; Layard 2005.

need to address our focus to resilience and child participation to create and maintain sustainable subjective wellbeing.

Even though the holistic approach of subjective wellbeing is necessary, there also lies a challenge in it. Even the goals towards child wellbeing are clear, the helping strategies are sometimes hard to address, which can be seen as a confusing mixture of different theories, projects and fieldwork models. The difficulties also concern the question of hearing children themselves, which is not always obvious. The need of discuss is urgent, where we need to find key factors on the theory level, to build clear focus on child wellbeing through all-encompassing approach, where the idea of sustainable wellbeing plays a key role. This article is focusing on theory-building around the idea of strengthening sustainability via *psychological resilience*, the lifelong capacity of survival. Also taking *child participation* to the starting point of theory- and strategy-building in situation where it stands for the basis of subjective wellbeing, healthy social relationships and resilience, is a necessity. This article has a leading idea of building theoretical structure of resilience, participation and inner trust, which could work as a baseline for governments, NGO's, local partners, community workers and families. After theory-building, we can honestly try to discover, how can we reach sustainable wellbeing for the children?

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND PARTICIPATION

“Life is not a matter of holding good cards but of playing a poor hand well.”

-Robert L. Stevenson

Positive psychology approach includes a leading idea of assets working paradoxically towards subjective wellbeing. This means, that coping skills and personal strengths in life are not directly positive. Since 1960 scientists have highlighted the meaning of suffering as a major account what comes to psychological growth.⁴ The connection between suffering and wellbeing is based on the knowledge of ancient religions, where a painful life event was

⁴ Caplan 1964.

recognized as an opportunity.⁵ This perspective of positive change is also being based on the term of psychological resilience, which emphasizes the psychological capacity of human being to stay operational, even in the situation of adversity or a difficult hardship – or better – because of them. The recent development approach is using the adversities of life with an educative tune to train people to be even stronger and capable than before difficult setbacks.⁶ Resilience is an active and changing process in order to protect people, but also a capacity to be practiced.⁷ Resilience has been associated even to a muscle that we can consciously train and strengthen.⁸

Psychological resilience is described to be “ordinary magic”, which is built around basics (environmental assets), belonging, coping (f. e. problem solving), core self (f. e. handling emotions) and learning life skills (f. e. decision-making).⁹ Even though psychological resilience has been perceived to be a personal capacity, it has recently been announced to have also a character of group capacity, and above all - a nature which develops mainly within social relations. Thus, psychological resilience rests fundamentally on relationships.¹⁰ The baseline of resilience begins to develop in early childhood communication, where the relationship of affection is safe and surrounded by inner cohesion of family.¹¹ Results show, that a child needs at least one caring adult, who genuinely accepts him/her.¹² Still, any other safe and warm relationship built during a lifetime can be seen meaningful contributor towards child wellbeing.¹³

Current psychosocial research approach strongly connects resilience to a dynamic nature of process.¹⁴ It begins in social relationships, where a person can start creating, building and strengthening his psychological resilience through social-emotional reflection.¹⁵ With developing social and emotional skills, personal values, attitudes and also other operating models towards social connections and communities, a person can reflect and develop his personal understanding about life situations and perspectives. For example, psychological flexibility means a person’s capacity to transform in different situations, and social

⁵ Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004, p. 2.

⁶ Richardson 2002, p. 309-312.

⁷ Masten 2010, p. 30.

⁸ Walsh 2006, p. 7.

⁹ Hart, Blincow & Thomas 2008.

¹⁰ Zautra 2014, p. 185-193.

¹¹ Bradley, Davis, Kaye & Wingo 2014, 200–202.

¹² Walsh 2006, p. 11.

¹³ Werner 2012, p. 555; Baumeister & Leary 1995, p. 500.

¹⁴ Richardson 2002, p. 309.

¹⁵ Masten 2013, p. 199-200; Zautra 2014, p. 185.

competence is shown in psychosocial skills, which maintain important relationships. According to different studies, these capacities or skills are on the central core, when we are examining psychological human survival.¹⁶ Importantly, compassion-based voluntary work has in several studies proven to strengthen these emotional and social skills, which have seen to be very effective concerning resilience-building.¹⁷ Still, these skills can not be learnt without facing the real challenges of life with a realistic attitude. Besides this, a person needs to believe in his/her own voice and possibility to make a difference, and most of all participate in their own life situations and happenings as an active party.¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum has declared that people must have a free choice of life regarding what a concept of *good life* means to them.¹⁹ In one aspect, the concept of good life is believed to be seen together as *wellbeing* and *well-becoming*. This view is based on the fact how especially children see themselves in a condition of development and becoming, and also in their active status.²⁰

The active and participative basis of wellbeing (or well-becoming) has also shown some evidence on a small Finnish study of resilience, where *action* was found one of most important coping factors in the situation, when a person was struggling with life adversities. Qualitative data of voluntary workers, who had survived through serious hardships in life, mentioned action to have different forms from compassion-based helping to sports or social activities with friends, but the main qualification was just to stay operational and active with facing their own problems, which are concerning themselves.²¹ In other words, participating action was building one of the leading pathways to the development of psychological resilience.

Participation is now presented here as one form of activity, where a child can take actions according to his/hers own life circumstances, face life adversities with realistic attitude, and have social contacts, which are proven to be also the most effective factors in resilience-building (Model I).

¹⁶ Bradley et al. 2014, p. 199-200.

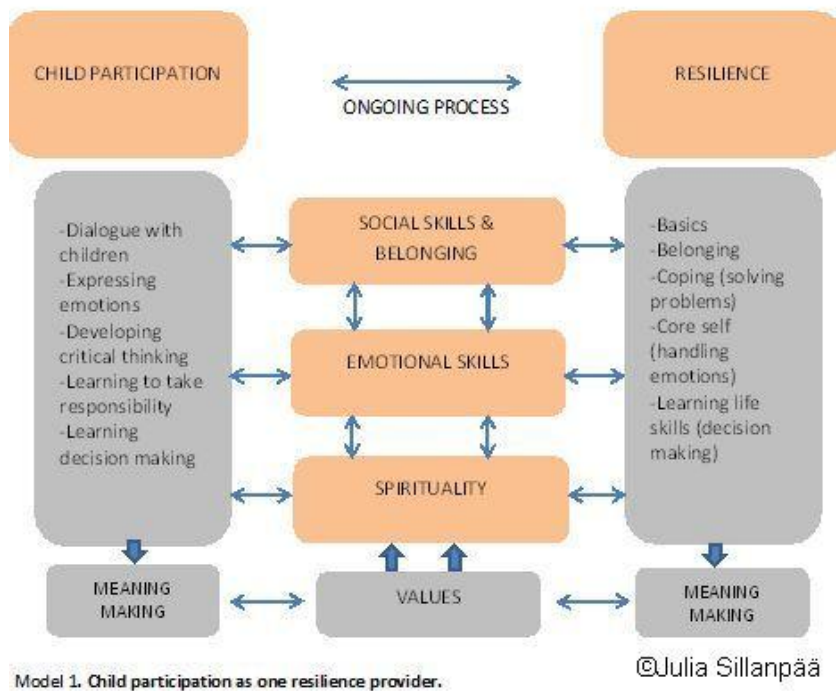
¹⁷ Brown & Okun 2014, 172–173

¹⁸ Walsh 2006, p. 10.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, 2011.

²⁰ Andresen & Gerarts, 2014.

²¹ Sillanpää 2015.



Participation includes the core idea of encouraging children to practice their life skills through taking actions against their own problems, which is quite similar with the aim of life skills learning with resilience. Second, participation gives us good practical tools to implement the activities in resilience building. For example, active dialogue with children in youth clubs and community actions are essential for resilience, where children get a chance to express their own emotions, opinions and thoughts. Participation and resilience share a common baseline as ongoing processes, why they both can be developed and educated. On the field of development work it is highly relevant, that we can make local people participate to the projects which are concerning their own environment and wellbeing. This kind of participation gives us a chance to build sustainable wellbeing, when we can assure, that after leaving the consulted place the development process keeps going on, even though the consulting organization has left. This is a very important point, when we are building models for fieldwork and implementing the theory of resilience and child participation (Model 1).

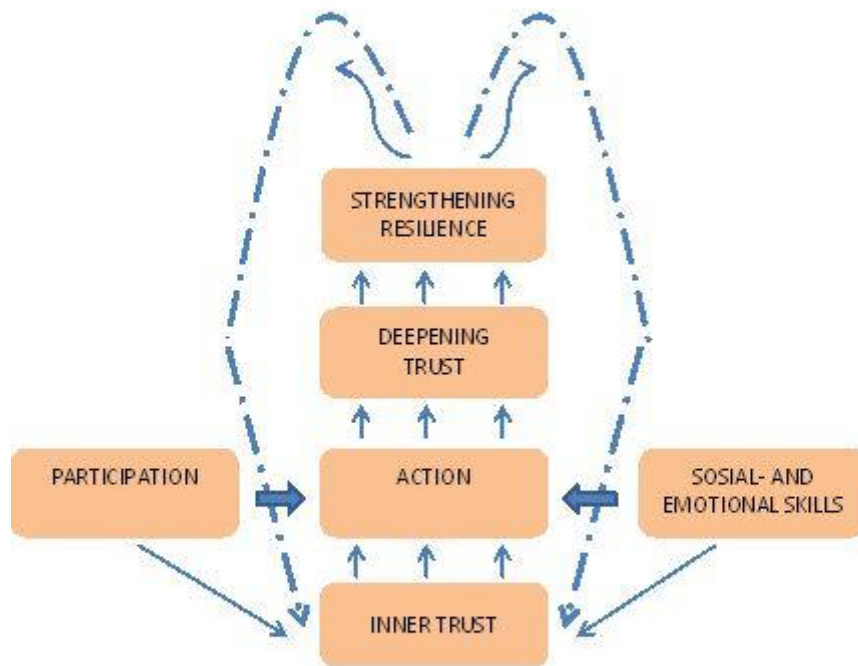
3 INNER TRUST

“When the root is deep, there is no reason to fear the wind”

(Unknown)

Even though action has shown to be somehow related to strengthening resilience, an even more important factor conducted by the Finnish study was the power of *inner trust*. Inner trust is about the deepest believe in self, others and life in general. This was found to be the starting point for psychological resilience, not only in the practical level by giving a starter kick for social actions (f. e. participation or compassion-based helping), but also in the level of theory by initiating the resilience process (Model 2).²² An action needs at least one kind of setting of belief, that what person is about to do, is going to be worth doing.

²² Sillanpää 2015.



Model 2. Resilience Shower as the result of Inner trust and Action.

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Even though the evidence of the current study is quite small, the importance of future studies is shown on the results; a person with strong inner trust is capable of starting an action towards problem solving.²³ This same force of trust also is the thrust of resilience, which comes in action after setbacks. In other words, a person who can trust in his/her coping, will also start an action towards it and overcome obstacles. In the situation where resilience process is possibly depending on inner trust, brings this us more closely to the center of values and meaning-making, which have been resulted to give better requirements to actively work with problem solving²⁴ and now also in trust-building.

The only way to learn from mistakes or explain setbacks ourselves is to handle them by giving meanings to life events. Meaning-making on the other hand, is all about values. Our personal values, family values, values of the community – they are all important capacity among human survival and existence. Work with children and youth on life skills training and practicing meaning making with participative social interventions are highly important, where

²³ Sillanpää 2015.

²⁴ Park & Slattery 2014, 270–279

children can determine their own beliefs, opinions and faith. This spiritual part of human wellbeing not only includes the concern of the self and the transcendent but also a lived reality.²⁵ Understanding of life values and human existence have even claimed to be the basis of human wellbeing.²⁶ Practical ways to strengthen inner trust towards life can be for example; pondering and reflecting values, discovering life around narrative life stories or even writing a gratitude diary. Inner trust towards self and others, on the other hand, can be trained via participative social activities and healthy relationships (Model 2).²⁷ In the situation, where trust can be the crucial force of self esteem, action and resilience, we can definitely make an assumption that spiritual wellbeing, together with participative social activities, is one of the most important factors on the way towards sustainable wellbeing.

Even though the idea of this article is quite ambitious, there can be seen at least some trying to produce sustainability. This article is claiming, that sustainable wellbeing can be built around the central terms of psychological resilience, participation and inner trust. Sustainability arises from the nature of the terms, when they are always transforming, developing and changing. This is making them teachable, and together with safe social contacts, meaning making and action-taking, even sustainable. We can actually try to build a solid ground around this theory and use it as a frame for everyone working towards human or child wellbeing, because the theory is covering every part of wellbeing and most of all, because without a clear theory we cannot provide strong, consistent or sustainable fieldwork.

²⁵ Helminiak 1996.

²⁶ Bangert 2013.

²⁷ Sillanpää 2015.

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TEN STEPS TO A SUSTAINABLE WELLBEING

1. When facing life adversities, stay active. Do sports. Write down your thoughts. Meet people. Go for a walk. Clean the house.
2. Take the key role. Only you know the best for your own good.
3. Write down the problem, say the issue out loud. Deal with the problem shamelessly, we all make mistakes.
4. Find co-mates dealing with same setbacks. Cry and laugh together. Learn to move from a feeling to another.
5. Feel all your emotions through and give meanings to your life events.
6. Write down a life story of yours. Read it. How could the story continue?
7. Dare to dream. Think what is important for you.
8. Share your story. Help other people dealing with same issues. Show your skill named compassion. This is the best you have learned from your setbacks.
9. At least now, have a deep understanding about you being a survivor. Be proud of your own experience.
10. Continue building trust to yourself, the people around you and to the fact, that there might be some bigger meaning for your story to be told. Keep sharing it.