**REVIEW**

**RESCUR: A resilience programme for early years and primary schools in Europe**

**TEACHERS’ MANUAL**

**EARLY YEARS**

**Overview**

First of all, I would like to congratulate the RESCUR team on an excellent set of materials for children aged 4-5 years. The rationale of this manual is very clearly set out in Chapter 1 in the light of huge changes in Europe at the present time. Many children and their families are directly affected by these changes, for example, refugees, immigrants and cultural minorities. Many of these children potentially face discrimination, as do children who are different or vulnerable in some way; the team also highlights the fact that gifted children too can face discrimination in society. The argument is that children who experience discrimination and exclusion are at heightened risk of dropping out of school, failing to reach their potential, facing social and emotional difficulties in their relationships with others and experiencing mental health difficulties. Although a particular focus is on potentially vulnerable children, the team argues strongly that **all** children will benefit from a resilience curriculum that proactively prepares them for the wide range of experiences, both positive and negative, that they will inevitably have in the course of their lives in their schools and communities. The aim is to equip all children to meet life’s challenges and to strengthen their own powers of hope, positive thinking, resilience and concern for others.

**Theoretical rationale**

The RESCUR team provides a convincing rationale that underpins the development of the materials in the curriculum. This builds on existing knowledge and research in the field of resilience, mindfulness and the power of narrative. The theoretical models are explained clearly and references are there for those who wish to study further.

***I wondered, however, if the team might have considered some of the criticisms in the research literature of the concept of resilience. For example, some sociologists criticize the emphasis on personal resilience and coping in the face of adversity on the grounds that it takes away the responsibility for such social ills as poverty and war from society and places the ‘cure’ in the personal efforts of the individual.*** I don’t personally agree with this kind of critique, but I wondered if the research team had considered mentioning their awareness of such arguments. Perhaps refer to Werner and Smith (1982) in this context since, in their study of resilient children, they document the need for young people in conditions of adversity to have an adult (often a teacher) who looked out for that child and gave them self-worth. Personally, I think that it is justifiable to argue the case for strengthening the children, despite all that they may have suffered, and empowering all children to develop a sense of empathy and caring for others.

A further point might be that, since some of the target children may well have had very severe experiences in their lives, it could be difficult for them to talk about their personal difficulties directly. If they do begin to share their hurt and loss, ***I wondered whether the team had done enough to prepare the teachers to deal with a child’s distress and to know when to refer that child on to appropriate counsellors or psychologists should a topic become too disturbing. I would suggest a section in the manual with guidelines on what to do if it becomes apparent that the materials uncover issues in the life of a particular child that require further help and support beyond the scope of the resilience curriculum. Each country should have its own policy on how to address such issues as they affect children; there should be appropriate staff in the school and agencies for further referral.***

**Implementation of the curriculum**

The resilience curriculum developed in this manual is grounded in a wealth of knowledge from practitioners and researchers and the structure of the curriculum is clearly described. The materials are designed carefully to be of immediate interest to children of different ages and abilities. The methods include: mindfulness, story-telling, a wide range of activities, take-home exercises to do with parents, and, best of all, the delightful puppet characters, Zelda and Sherlock. The art work and design is lovely and the colours are bound to appeal to young children. There are some very creative ideas too for teachers to build on and be inspired by, for example, the beautifully designed booklet on saying “No!!”

There are six curriculum themes, each with two sub-themes, each of which has three topics. The themes encompass a wide range, covering not only communication skills, personal relationships, the development of positive thinking and the enhancement of the sense of self, but also the mindset of building on one’s own strengths and even turning negative experiences and challenges into opportunities.

***I wondered if the team had considered colour-coding the six different themes in order to make navigation through the materials easier.***

The pedagogy of teaching each theme in a way that is appropriate for the age of the children is very clearly thought through. Each sub-theme and its accompanying topics has at least one activity focused on difference, whether that concerns bullying, social exclusion, isolation, loneliness or cultural mismatches. The aims of each lesson are set out clearly and each is expressed through a wide range of activities, stories and role-plays using the puppets that children find so engrossing. The mindfulness exercises that precede the lessons set the scene and get the children into the mindset of reflecting on their own emotions as a typical part of each day. This self-reflective stance appears throughout the whole curriculum.

The team has also provided clear explanations to the teachers about the meaning of the key concepts and how to translate these quite complex ideas into activities that will be meaningful to the children. Assessment is built into the curriculum with useful checklists that the teacher can complete in order to document the children’s strengths, needs and targets for the future.

I also commend the focus on teachers’ resilience – an aspect that is too often forgotten. I like the guidance on carrying out a needs assessment prior to the implementation of the programme in order to involve all members of the whole school.

***I wondered, however, if there should be some examples of how teachers might adapt the materials to the particular cultural context where they work.*** One of the difficulties in the delivery of SEL programmes, as documented by Humphrey et al. (2010) in their evaluation of the UK programme Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), is that when teachers deviate too far from the original conception of the programme the effects are reduced.  ***The resilience curriculum as proposed here is by its nature cross-cultural so it would be useful to provide some guidance on how flexible the materials actually are.***

**Typographical errors**

***I noticed that there was some inconsistency in the wording of themes, sub-themes and topics between the rationale in Chapter 1 and the actual materials in Part 2. I suggest a thorough proof-reading to put this right. There were also some typos or inconsistencies in English expression. Where I noticed this, I corrected the mistake, or suggested an alternative form of expression, using ‘sticky notes’ on the pdf form itself.***

**References**

Humphrey, N., Lendrum, A. & Wigelsworth, M. (2010). *Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) Programme in Secondary School: National Evaluation*. Research Report DFE-RR049. London: Department for Education Publication.

Werner, E. E. & Smith, R. S. (19820. *Vulnerable but Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

**EARLY PRIMARY**

As before, I would like to congratulate the RESCUR team on an excellent set of materials for primary school children aged from 6-8 years. The materials have made a good progression to adapt to the abilities and self-awareness of children in the early primary stage of their education. The activities follow on clearly from the rationale as provided in Part 1. The methods are varied and imaginative, and will definitely appeal to this age group with their emphasis on narrative, puppets, drawings, photographs and cartoons, musical activities, cooperative group work, problem-solving and film.

Mindfulness activities continue to be core to this curriculum. As with the pre-schoolers, teachers are encouraged to provide activities for the children to carry out with their parents at home. The topics are complex ones and touch on potentially difficult themes, including isolation, rejection, social exclusion, bullying, dealing with conflict, loss and prejudice. Again, the use of the puppets, Sherlock and Zelda, offers endless opportunities for children to explore the issues covered within the RESCUR framework and to build on the learning that they will have experienced in the Early Years RESCUR curriculum. The issues covered in the topics address the aims of the RESCUR curriculum in a sensitive and thoughtful way. Although the focus is on potentially vulnerable children, the team has designed materials that will appeal to **all** children. As with the Early Years curriculum, encouragement of the children to take a self-reflective stance appears throughout the whole curriculum.

***In the context of peer relationships, I wondered if there should be some mention (possibly in Part 1) of research and practice into peer support against bullying and social exclusion. See for example the module on children helping children from a whole school approach perspective by Cowie and Jennifer (2010) on the website*** [***www.vista-europe.org***](http://www.vista-europe.org) ***These online materials and activities can also be adapted for late primary school children.***

The team has also provided clear explanations to the teachers about the meaning of the key concepts and how to translate these quite complex ideas into activities that will be meaningful to the children. Some of the topics are potentially distressing to the children although the stories and work with puppets are designed in such a way as to provide support and understanding for each child. ***However, I do recommend that there should be very clear, explicit guidance for the teachers as they deliver lessons on topics such as “We have received a letter” from Theme 1 “Enhancing Communication Skills”. It is possible that such activities might reawaken distressing emotions in some children so the teacher would need to be mindful of this and be ready to offer support while still engaging with the rest of the class. Is it clear that these lessons would have two staff members available just in case a child is upset?***

Each of the six Themes is provided with a clear rationale for teachers as well as helpful tips and a wide range of imaginative activities. There is a varied and creative use of materials, including photographs, drawings, imaginative stories, role plays, problem-solving activities, cooperative group work, and many opportunities to explore and express feelings and to discover aspects of relationships. The team has displayed great sensitivity in helping children of this age to express and value themselves and their relationships. Some issues are challenging. For example, there is thoughtful exploration of prejudice through the story of Zelda’s feelings about the Owl family. The problem-solving activities in Theme 4 are very appealing and varied. I like the imaginative use of diagrams, pictures and drawings.  ***I think, however, that the portrayal of Grandpa and Grandma in the picture on p.309 is rather stereotypical. They look more like frail great- they are typically healthy and active.***

**LATE PRIMARY**

The RESCUR curriculum Late Primary materials have been extended and developed to be challenging for children from 9-11 years, at the late primary stage of their education. Zelda and Sherlock remain but are in the background, with the stories and puppet play replaced by activities that are closely related to the real social world of the children. The imaginative world is not forgotten, however, and the materials continue to appeal to the inner world of the child, through narrative, music, poetry and art. Role plays continue to play an important part as the children practise such skills as conflict resolution and other forms of peer support. There are many opportunities for the children to explore solutions to everyday difficulties and to discuss and debate the complex moral and ethical issues that they will all encounter in their lives. They are also presented with outstanding role models, such as Nelson Mandela and Malala, to demonstrate the power of resilience in the face of adversity. There are also many opportunities for the children to reflect on others’ behaviour and on moral issues that arise by considering proverbs and narratives as well as real-life dilemmas. The children are given the opportunity to consider the rights of young people across the world and this builds on the introductory activities about children’s rights that appeared in RESCUR Early Primary Curriculum. Through the consistent use of the spiral curriculum, the team has provided varied opportunities for the children to revisit themes and topics and to reflect on them in new ways. The materials are extremely well researched. Their success is reflected in the positive evaluations from the children who tested and critiqued the materials during the course of the project.

**Assessment**

Assessment is built into the curriculum with useful checklists that the teacher can complete in order to document the children’s strengths, needs and targets for the future. The self-assessment checklists for the children cover the aims of each theme and subtheme in a consistent way, so providing a clear outline on areas of strength and areas where further learning needs to take place. ***I wondered, however, whether some of the language in the checklists was rather difficult for children of this age. For example, in assessing learning from Early Primary Theme 1, the team uses the phrase “economically underprivileged”, “auditory”, “problem life situations” and “desirable and undesirable behaviours” - terms which may need some explanation to young learners. Similarly, in Theme 2, Building Healthy Relationships, some sentences in the self-assessment were rather long. For example, the item “I am able to identify situations where I need to be careful and kind when interacting with my friends in order not to lose their friendship” could perhaps be divided into two statements in order to clarify the meaning for a young learner.***

At the Late Primary stage, the terminology was, for the most part, appropriate for the children’s cognitive level though some words might be confusing, unless they had been explained and used during the activities, for example in the self-assessment sentence “I can empathise with and understand the **collocutor**”.

**Typographical errors**

***As before, I noticed that there was some inconsistency in the wording of themes, sub-themes and topics between the rationale in Chapter 1 pp 7-8 and the actual materials in Part 2. I suggest a thorough proof-reading to put this right. There were also some typos or inconsistencies in English expression. Where I noticed this, I corrected the mistake, or suggested an alternative form of expression, using ‘sticky notes’ on the pdf form itself.***

**References**

Cowie, H. & Jennifer, D. (2010). *Children Helping Children*. [www.vista-europe.org](http://www.vista-europe.org)

**PARENTS’ GUIDE**

This excellent *Parents’ Guide* aims to help parents to complement the RESCUR curriculum that their children are following at pre-school and primary school. The RESCUR team has developed a set of materials to provide practical, everyday ways to enable parents to promote emotional well-being in their children at home. The RESCUR team has taken account of the fact that some of the children may well have had very severe experiences in their lives, and they deal with challenging topics in a sensitive way that takes account of hurt, pain and loss..

In parallel with the programme at school, in the *Parents’ Guide* follows the six curriculum themes, each with its sub-themes. The themes cover not only communication skills, personal relationships, the development of positive thinking and the enhancement of the sense of self, but also the mindset of building on one’s own strengths and even turning negative experiences and challenges into opportunities.

The activities to be carried out at home are interesting and provide many, varied opportunities for children and their parents to work together on the topics that will have been covered at school. Hope, happiness and humour permeate the activities, even when they explore difficulties and setbacks.

The feedback from children indicates that they appreciate the opportunity to share the emotional experiences that are covered in this curriculum with their parents, with much mutual learning taking place. I really like the ways in which the activities are grounded in everyday events, including interactions at school, events that arise from play in the park, topics enacted in television soaps and dramas, stories both told and read, episodes from the news or the family’s history. This is a wonderful opportunity to help parents to develop creative ways to enable their child to interpret familiar and new experiences. The activities provide a rich resource through which parents can encourage their child to develop a positive outlook on life, and can affirm their child’s self-esteem and resilience. The materials also help parents to collaborate with their children in finding solutions to everyday interpersonal problems.

There are, of course, many ways in which parents can feel empowered to build up their child’s sense of self and also to help their child when they encounter difficulties. But the RESCUR *Parents’ Guide* is offered in a positive way that fosters resilience while acknowledging that some families will have suffered great hardships in their lives. Characters like Mr Brightside and Mr Darkside give insights, in a humorous way, into the value of positive thinking, and structure a consistent approach to developing a positive mindset on life. Activities such as *Stop and Think* encourage a reflective stance which permeates the whole *Parents’ Guide*. If the parents really grasp these concepts, no matter how hard their lives are, they can understand how their own resilience in the face of adversity can influence their child’s whole outlook on life. This aspiration culminates in Theme 6 where parents are given ideas on how to help their child turn challenges into opportunities, so strengthening their own capacity for hope, positive thinking, resilience and empathy for others.

As they did in the Teachers’ Manuals, the RESCUR team provides a convincing rationale that underpins the development of the materials in the curriculum. This builds on existing knowledge and research in the field of resilience, mindfulness and the power of narrative. ***My only concern is that the language in the introductory section may be rather too academic for some parents, especially where English (or whatever language the materials are written in) is not the parents’ first language. I wonder if the words could be illustrated with pictures, photographs and diagrams to get the message across. Where possible, workshops could be offered to support the parents in their commitment to the materials.***

Helen Cowie, July, 2015