

# STORIES OF HOPE

## REIMAGINING EDUCATION

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# 35. “Resilience Finders”: Flourishing in life through immersive game experiences

*Rachel Higdon and Hilary Thomson*

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## Abstract

The resilience game “Resilience Finders” integrates storytelling, character creation, gamification, and immersive learning to offer a unique board game and live action experience for young people and adults. Designed as an alternative to formal educational and training models, the game focuses on personal development and building agency, supporting participants to flourish in both personal and professional contexts. Responding to the growing global demand for resilience amid challenges such as conflict, pandemics, sustainability issues, and uncertainty, Resilience Finders provides an experiential learning framework that fosters adaptability, creativity, and solution-finding skills. In alignment with the goals set out by the 2022 United Nations Transforming Education Summit—which calls for more dynamic, inclusive, and student-centred learning—Resilience Finders reimagines education to prioritise flexibility, strength, and human flourishing in an unpredictable world.

**Keywords:** resilience; gaming; creativity; experiential learning; sustainability

This chapter provides a case study of how a resilient mindset can be developed to support children, young people (that is, teenagers and young adults), and adults to navigate the complexities of their lives. It offers alternative perspectives (Churchill, 2018; Higdon, 2014, 2016, 2018) to formal learning in compulsory and post-compulsory education by using a gaming model that seeks experiential and hands-on learning in real time; where individuals and groups can try out solutions and problem solve in a safe environment and can interact between risk and protective processes. Feedback from teachers and facilitators is showing that young people and adults find the game positive and exciting, and it also reaches those that can be disengaged and disinterested in conventional classroom spaces. This case study hopes to inspire other teachers, facilitators, and young people to devise their own models and toolkits to develop resilience resources.

“Resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways” (Ungar, 2008, p. 225). Michael Rutter (1987) recognises that these resources need to have protective processes to encourage individual and collective wellbeing. Research studies in resilience have expanded in the last thirty years and have centralised on human development. Even before the global pandemic, the development of resilience had been a focus due to the complexity of the emotional, developmental, economic and technical challenges that young people have to grow into and mediate within their own experiences (Goldstein & Brooks, 2023). The mental health of adolescents and young adults in the Western world was declining before the COVID-19 pandemic, with adolescents’ and young adults’ rates of depression and anxiety reaching historically high levels (Shanahan et al., 2023). There have been increasing research studies that explore the interactions between risk and protective processes and unpack the factors that inhibit or develop resilience (Ellis et al., 2017; Goldstein & Brooks, 2023; Wyman & Warner-King, 2017). Sam Goldstein and Robert Brooks (2023, p. 4) identify a “resilience mindset” as necessary to support young people to be functional adults; even those without obvious trauma or a clinical diagnosis need to cope with the pressures and expectations that exist

around them. As children grow into adults, they need to overcome adversity and disappointments to solve problems and to relate to one another, and to treat themselves and others with respect.

The boardgame, *"Resilience Finders: The Book of Invisible Paths"* uses storytelling, character creation, gamification, and immersive learning environments to create personal development programmes for young people and adults. The toolkit comprises a board game that sits alongside personal development exercises aimed at building resilience. The toolkit is designed to engage players and build a resilient mindset, giving participants' agency. It uses experiential learning and gaming as an alternative to more conventional school and tertiary education pedagogies, helping individuals flourish in both their personal and professional lives and develop inner mental strength and wellbeing.

The Resilience Finders toolkit can support teachers and classes working in the formal education sector and youth leaders and those working with disadvantaged young people and adults in informal education environments. It can also be used for staff training and wellbeing. The board game sits alongside personal development exercises aimed at building resilience. These are wrapped around a fantasy world and story metaphor. The story adventure consists of a journey across a fantasy land with challenges and tasks to complete along the way and milestones to reach. Players carry a virtual backpack that they fill with resilience through the journey. They collect a toolkit of strategies in the form of personal development exercises to help them make choices and move forward with their lives. People use their imaginations and escape into an alternative world while addressing their own "real-life" issues and feel supported along the way. The bright, colourful, and fun game format aims to increase mental wellbeing and motivate people to enjoy themselves, raising oxytocin levels and giving them an uplift.

The programme content draws on understanding the obstacles people face and the developmental stages we all go through in life. Within the safety of the fiction, players focus on confidence and self-esteem building; nurture empathy and positive mind-sets; and face failure and stress triggers and learn how to deal with them. Players also learn how to address the fear of change; develop healthy behaviours and foster better relationships and communities. By cultivating positive mindsets and unlocking people's ability to dream, experiment, and look



at things from different perspectives, players open up and have a chance to reframe the way they approach their own lives and respond to society. By playing the game, they increase their speaking and listening skills, language expansion, motivation, and interpersonal skills.

The toolkit uses a relational approach, giving every young person and adult a voice and a lexicon around resilience, which means they not only understand what it is, but can also talk about it in relation to themselves, others, and the world around them. This is part of developing essential life skills such as empathy, problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and emotional literacy. This sits perfectly alongside the United Kingdom's (UK) educational policy and strategy that addresses developmental and emotional coaching, personal tutoring, personal, social, health and economic programmes, citizenship, and career guidance.

There has been an increased demand for resilience across all sectors. Global futures reveal that pressures like conflict, pandemics, climate sustainability, and uncertainty are more and more creating situations that need to be mediated and managed. Developing resilience and the skills to navigate life and thrive, rather than just survive, has never been more salient.

As a result, evidence is growing that there is a need to recognise, value, and teach people to be adaptable, creative thinkers, and solution finders so that we are more robust and better able to cope with societal changes and challenges. Transforming education (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022; United Nations Transforming Education Summit, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023) recognises the need to adapt to the shifting skills needed professionally, making learning more student-centred, connected, dynamic, inclusive and collaborative, allowing creativity to flourish. "Learning resources must evolve to reflect these transformations in how teaching and learning occur" (United Nations, 2022).

Currently there is a discrepancy between this aspiration and the trajectory of UK educational policy. The English curriculum is being narrowed and teaching methods streamlined with too much teacher focus on English and mathematics and pupil testing, which is affecting the quality of education (Ofsted & Spielman, 2018). Moving away from didactic teaching to multimodal learning immerses learners, helping them to understand and remember because they are engaged with a

number of their senses—visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic (Birch et al., 2010). There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that creative methodologies can support societal resilience and play a key part in future-proofing society (Sundaralingam, 2022).

The "fall out" from the COVID-19 pandemic has increased mental health problems and this is of great concern to the National Health Service in the UK. 8.5 million adults and 1.5 million children in England will need support for their mental health as a direct result of the pandemic over the next three to five years (Moynihan et al., 2021).

Resilience Finders was conceived by Hilary Thomson who facilitates the project through her creative company. Thomson is undertaking further development of the Resilience Finders toolkit and is supported by a variety of stakeholders in business and education. The stakeholders believe that this is an important piece of work for societal future-proofing.

Thomson has developed a system of creative processes that unlock people's potential and states, "I take them on a journey of self-discovery to find their own story. The only difference between a stumbling block and a stepping-stone is the way you look upon it" (Thompson, interview communication, June 23, 2023). The design and content of this toolkit draws on Thomson's experience of writing and delivering creative training programmes and workshops with both adults and children. It has been designed to be flexible so that the time frame, length, and structure of the game can be adapted to fit the teacher, trainer or facilitator's particular group size and context. The trainers and teachers pick and mix the personal development exercises that suit their group's focus, level and intention. The quality of the materials and artwork has been professionally designed to stimulate and engage the players. Thomson argues that it is important to send a subliminal message of value to players, many of whom may be from disadvantaged backgrounds. She argues: "How can you raise people's self-esteem, if you don't give them quality resources?" (Thompson, interview communication, June 23, 2023).

The methodology that Thomson uses draws on storytelling, immersive experiences, drama, coaching, gamification, and multimodal ways of working.

I have long had a fascination with people and the human condition... I find the internal stories people tell themselves and how this is reflected in their external behaviours intriguing. It is the push, pull... between this internal monologue and the external dialogue that informs who we are as people and how we react to the world. In the same vein, deconstructing what resilience is and how it informs and influences our behaviours is deeply interesting. The deeper I go, the more I realise that resilience is essential to the human condition. It does not exist in isolation but in the interconnectedness of everything. We have only to look at the natural world to see this in evidence. Now, with climate emergency on the horizon, we need to act fast and make a paradigm shift in our attitudes and ways of being. This starts with ourselves and how we empower and educate people. We need to not only look at people development but also world systems, how and what needs to change (Thompson, interview communication, June 23, 2023).

The game takes participants through a creative process that is practical, logical and experiential and therefore memorable. It uses lateral thinking, drawing from life experience and enabling the creation of new informed choices. It encourages people to take charge of their own destinies, preparing them to make changes and raising aspirations for their lives and their futures. Each individual's life is a story line and one that they have some control over.

## Why is storytelling so powerful and important in times of change and transition?

Stories have been used powerfully in many cultures and in many languages to support people through transitions (Roche & Sadowsky, 2003) and are universal in crossing boundaries of language, culture, and age.

The archetypal story of change and transition is the "hero's journey". Every hero/heroine's story, whether it is the eponymous "Odysseus", or Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz", follows a similar pattern:

- the status quo
- the challenge
- the stepping into the unknown
- the obstacles on the way



- the resources or "helpers"
- meeting the challenge/ transformation
- coming home again/ settling into the new landscape" (Sinclair, 2019).

Resilience Finders uses the hero's journey to harness individual stories of transition and challenge by helping individuals become the architects of their own lives, building their own unique identities and their own unique paths in life. Thomson claims, "It is through creativity and fun and sharing of ourselves that we create the glue that brings us together and enables us to create our own inner resilience in times of adversity" (Thompson, interview communication, June 23, 2023).

Resilience is a life skill that everyone should hold in order to cope with whatever life throws at them. By providing the tools to grow and flourish via an engaging, inspiring and adventurous narrative, thought and reflection are encouraged, which enriches minds and empowers lives.

### The pilots

Initial trials of the toolkit between 2021 and 2023 proved that engaging people in this immersive environment has tangible outcomes. The trials took place in schools, youth groups and community spaces. Thomson argues that individuals are on their own unique path and learn essential life skills. In our interview she reads through the players' feedback and evaluations.

Children, young people and adults found the game engaging and spoke of: coming alive; opening up, laughing; relaxing; communicating with each other; thinking about themselves; considering different perspectives; and helping each other. Teachers and facilitators have observed: kindness; team working; and people finding their voice, giving opinions, collaborating, generating ideas and enjoying themselves (H. Thompson, interview communication, June 23, 2023).

While piloting the game, teachers revealed to Thomson that they had seen a marked regression in young people going through the school system due to the pandemic (2023, trial 2, school 2). They argued that it would need a whole cohort of pre-schoolers coming into school, to

move through the whole school system, before the “fall out of Covid 19 is really behind us” (2023, trial 2, school 2). Teachers and youth leaders said that they were finding that children and young people were not as ready to learn or cope with everything life threw at them (2023, trial 3, school 3). They lacked resilience (2023, trial 4, school 4). They want children and young people to be happy and able to build healthy relationships, to understand their own emotions and those of others, and to know how to deal with stress, feel positive and confident and like themselves (2023, trial 3, school 3). This encourages young people to become independent, responsible citizens who can look after themselves, each other and their world. The teachers said that they were always looking for new ways and resources to support this (2023, trial 4 and 5, school 4 and 5).

Thomson intends with some UK universities to undertake systematic research trials of the game across local education authorities. Thomson is developing a live action role play of the game to complement the board game.

### Take away

Gaming offers an alternative model for personal development in young people and adults. Preliminary findings show that immersive games are flexible and can be successfully adapted to meet the diversity in terms of ages, needs, and circumstances in order to be appropriate, relevant, and authentic experiences for the players. The creation of the games is also versatile:

- Teachers and group leaders can invent the games.
- The facilitator and the group can co-create the games.
- The students, young people and adults themselves can devise their own games and interactive models.

The toolkit and game have continuous iterations as the players give feedback and ideas for development.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Further detail of Thomson’s toolkit can be found at [www.resiliencefinders.co.uk](http://www.resiliencefinders.co.uk) and [www.ministryofimagination.co.uk](http://www.ministryofimagination.co.uk)

## Steps toward hope

- Use storytelling, character creation, gamification, and immersive learning to design engaging educational experiences like Resilience Finders for young people and adults.
- Focus on building personal development and agency through experiential and playful learning as an alternative to traditional curricula and training programs.
- Address the increasing demand for resilience by equipping participants with skills to navigate conflict, pandemics, sustainability challenges, and uncertainty.
- Recognise and teach adaptability, creativity, and solution-finding as essential skills for thriving in an unpredictable global future.

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