

RESILIENCE: A Case Study of the Personal Characteristics, Skills and Coping Strategies of Educationally Successful Adolescents.

Kellie M Fechner [Woodcrest State College (kfech3@eq.edu.au)].

Abstract:

While presented with more opportunities than ever before, today's young people are at greater risk of being left behind: disconnected, overwhelmed and depressed. As an educational community, we have followed the research trend over the last twenty years and moved away from the deficit model of risk towards a more positive focus on resilience. The next step in our collective journey is to take what we have learned about resilient, successful adolescents, those who thrive despite their circumstances, and apply it to the system at large, in order to ensure improved educational and life opportunities for all our students. Only then, can we help them reconnect with what matters most: their communities, their schools, their families and, above all, themselves.

In a school where socio-economic diversity and disadvantage predominate, one class of year nine students took up the challenge of unlocking the secrets to their success. Working with a class made up, not of the gifted and talented, but of the capable, their teacher uncovered the characteristics and skills that contributed to their resilience and, in doing so, opened the door into the mind and world of the adolescent. The students' stories are eye-opening, honest and powerful, revealing a series of fascinating paradoxes regarding the ever-present threat of despair and its influence on teenage values, hopes and dreams, and proving that, all too often, we underestimate the strength, wisdom and life experience of the young people in our classrooms.

Introduction:

The literature surrounding philosophy, curriculum and engagement in the middle years of schooling is dominated by the complementary notions of risk and resilience, yet the definitions of such terms remain vigorously contested. Indeed, these concepts can be understood from a multitude of perspectives, ranging from the psycho-social to the behavioural, however, it is imperative that they be interpreted and applied to a very specific situation; the middle phase classroom.

Studies of maladaptive behaviour abound and the concept of risk has been constructed largely through a deficit model, focusing on "what people *can't do* rather than what they *can do*" (Frydenberg, 1997). To this end, researchers have foregrounded a range of indicators including; abuse, criminal activity, delinquency, homelessness, neglect, poverty, school failure, substance abuse, suicide, teen pregnancy, and violence (Batten & Russell, 1995; Dryfoos, 1990; Fuller, 1998; Thompson, 2006). Despite the broad nature of these issues, however, risk factors can generally be attributed to four main areas of concern: the individual, the family, the school context, and the community or society at large (Batten and Russell, 1995; Fuller, 1998). Batten and Russell (1995), in particular, conducted a thorough analysis of risk factors, exploring a range of issues relating to the individual student's psychosocial, physical and behavioural characteristics; the structure, functionality, socio-economic context and stability of their families; the organisation, curriculum and climate of their schools; and the broader issues of poverty and social disempowerment in this country.

In understanding the link between risk and resilience, however, it may be more useful to consider at-risk youth as those young people for whom adolescence might not offer a sound basis on which to develop a satisfying and fulfilling adult life, and who may, through either disadvantage or difficulty, become maladjusted, leaving them prone to injury, harm or even death (Batten & Russell, 1995; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Newhouse-Maiden, Bahr, & Pendergast, 2005); these young people are the antithesis of the healthy well-adjusted teens described in *Good Kids* (Stinnett & O'Donnell, 1996).

There are some young people who "make it" in spite of their external circumstances and the greater majority of adolescents survive this turbulent time in their personal growth and development without incident (Frydenberg, 1997). They thrive socially, emotionally, physically, spiritually or intellectually, regardless of where they come from, their family situation, religious background, cultural heritage,

financial disadvantage or educational experience (Stinnet & O'Donnell, 1996). They are optimistic, capable problem-solvers who effectively manage the stress in their lives, enjoy some degree of spiritual health, and draw strength from strong connections to family, community or some other significant group (Hicks, 2002; Stinnet & O'Donnell, 1996). What sets these young people apart from their less successful peers is their social and behavioural development: their internal characteristics, most notably their self-talk, allow them to overcome their external circumstances and achieve to their academic and social potential (Bernard, 2002a).

Resilience, then, is competence: the hallmark of the high-wellness teen. It is the ability to maintain positive adaptive characteristics, to recover from setbacks, to bounce back or “bungee jump” through life’s inevitable pitfalls (Fuller, 1998; Newhouse-Maiden et al., 2005). The resilience paradigm is a far more optimistic frame of reference than that of risk, and revolves around the notion of empowering young people with the ability to recover from the difficulties they encounter (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). It is not defined by a lack of risk factors or negative life events, but rather, by the internal capacity of the individual to combat those external influences. By considering students’ life outcomes through the lens of resilience rather than risk, we are better able to examine how our young people succeed even when their development is threatened, and develop strategies that assist even the most at-risk student in developing the capacity to reach their potential.

Resilient adolescents adopt a positive mindset that allows them to perceive the world around them in a “helpful” manner. Their ability to interpret their life circumstances as opportunities rather than threats empowers them to alter their thinking and, in turn, their feelings and behaviours, in order to achieve academic success. They are not daunted by their circumstances, but tend to embrace them, and believe they “can do it”. Thus, they set out to achieve their goals by managing their time effectively, trying hard and “working tough”. They are confident, persistent, organized, self-accepting and independent. They get along well with others, and tend generally to be fair-minded and tolerant. They take calculated risks, and think carefully about their actions before the event rather than after (Bernard, 2002a, 2002b).

Unsuccessful adolescents, on the other hand, perceive themselves as powerless. Their poor psychological health is characterized by low self-esteem, anxiety, anger and rebelliousness, and negative thinking guides their perception and interpretation of the world around them. They believe they are fundamentally incapable, and tend to be underachievers who often use perfectionism or self-doubt as a reason for either giving up or not bothering in the first place. Thus, they tend neither to set goals nor to manage their time well, and their behaviour is marked by general disorganisation and a repertoire of well-developed work-avoidance strategies. They are generally intolerant of others, are frustrated by both their own limits and those of others, and have a high need for approval. They tend to make poor socio-behavioural choices, acting primarily without thinking (Bernard, 2002a, 2002b).

It is important to note, however, that according to the research, both positive and negative patterns of thinking can be triggered by significant, even random or accidental, events which are powerful enough in their impact to effectively change the direction of the young person’s life (Aronson, 2001; Howard and Johnson, 2006). Termed *turning point opportunities* by Howard and Johnson (2006), these events in the life of a young person can cause either negative chain reactions (which reinforce non-resilient thinking, behaviours and choices) or positive chain reactions (that strengthen resilient behaviour), regardless of the base psychological health of the individual prior to the event (Howard & Johnson, 2000, 2006; Olsson et al., 2003). Howard and Johnson (2006) noted, in particular, that when a student experienced either a desired outcome or a reduction in their stress levels as a result of their chosen response to a turning point opportunity, that response pattern tended to become part of that individual’s behavioural repertoire, which suggested, in turn, that resilience or non-resilience is not a permanent character trait, but a learned behaviour (Howard & Johnson, 2000, 2006; Olsson et al., 2003).

While there is a wealth of material to suggest that risk factors as diverse as economics, communication, culture, family, education, employment, human rights issues, lawlessness, mental health, substance abuse, technology and transience directly contribute to underachievement (Bernard, 2002a; Fuller, 2001; Gidley, 2002; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Westfall & Pisapia, 2000), research also indicates that “flexible, targeted and timely intervention programs” such as those called for in the *Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* (Education Queensland, 2003) do actually make a difference (Batten & Russell, 1995; Fuller, 2002).

To this end, Gidley (2002) calls for the integration of the intellectual and emotional domains, promoting a process of enculturation, whereby young people are empowered to draw on their wisdom, imagination, creativity and ethical values to generate and promote their own worthwhile personal futures. Similarly, Bernard (2002a) claims that by explicitly focusing on the teaching and development of this “discernable set of internal characteristics”, educators can actively assist young people in developing to their full academic and socio-emotional potential and insists, for this very reason, that “academic literacy and psychological literacy go hand in hand” (Bernard 2002a).

Over the past twenty years, researchers in this area have increasingly addressed the importance of understanding how positive life outcomes are achieved, with the view to better understanding the processes by which educators and indeed, educational systems, can provide improved opportunities for high-risk students to lead productive lives (Egeland, Carlson, & Stroufe, 1993; Garmezy & Masten, 1994; Masten & Wright, 1997). In particular, life trajectory research has revealed that one of the most significant keys to moving young people from negative life trajectories to full adolescent recovery is the presence of a significant adult (a friend, a teacher or an extended family member), either incidentally or intensely, over an extended period of time. It is interesting to note, though, that the significance of these individuals in the lives of young people relates more to their ability to simply be present and offer the young person a sense of who they are and where they belong, than to the life role they fulfill (Fuller, 1998).

The task at hand for educational leaders is to continue the momentum: to take what we know about resilient, successful adolescents and apply it to the system at large, in order to ensure improved educational and life opportunities for all our students. So that the collective consciousness of the educational community can be still and listen to what our young people have to say, this study is largely narrative. It is incumbent upon us to “hear the nuances of their stories, the values they express and the hopes, dreams and despair contained within them” (Fuller, 1998, p.178), so that we can better meet the challenge of providing a way forward for the “Click and Go” kids.

Findings:

This study blended descriptive and narrative methodologies, in order to capture the richness of individual examples of resilience and capitalise on the strong, trusting relationship that already existed between these students and the researcher. Participants completed an initial survey based partly on Rak and Patterson’s Resiliency Questionnaire (Thompson 2006, p.78-79), with the option of responding anonymously if they preferred not to participate in an interview. Based on student profiles, a smaller sample of participants was engaged in individual interviews. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of the respondents and anyone else to whom they referred.

Survey respondents were 13 to 15 years of age, and came from a range of diverse backgrounds, as summarised in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Student Demography

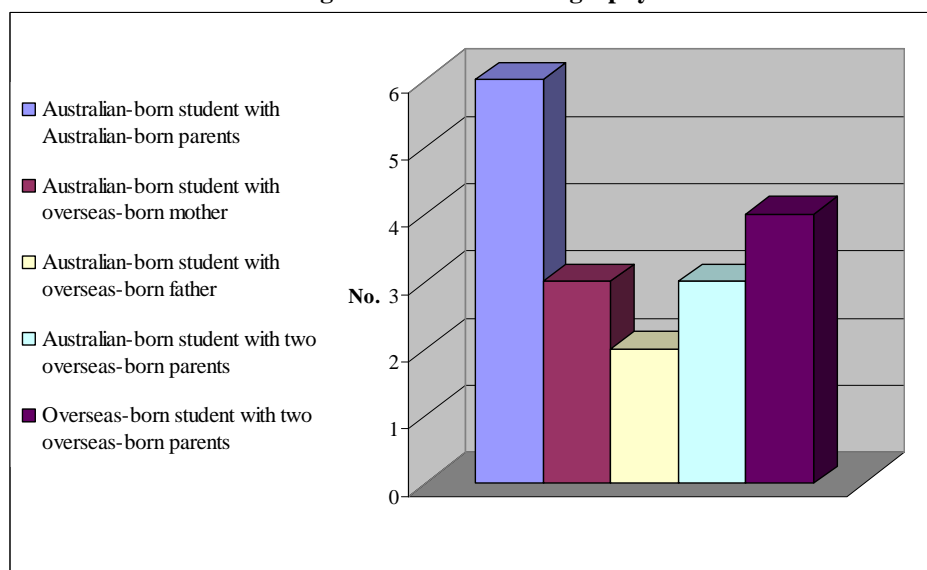
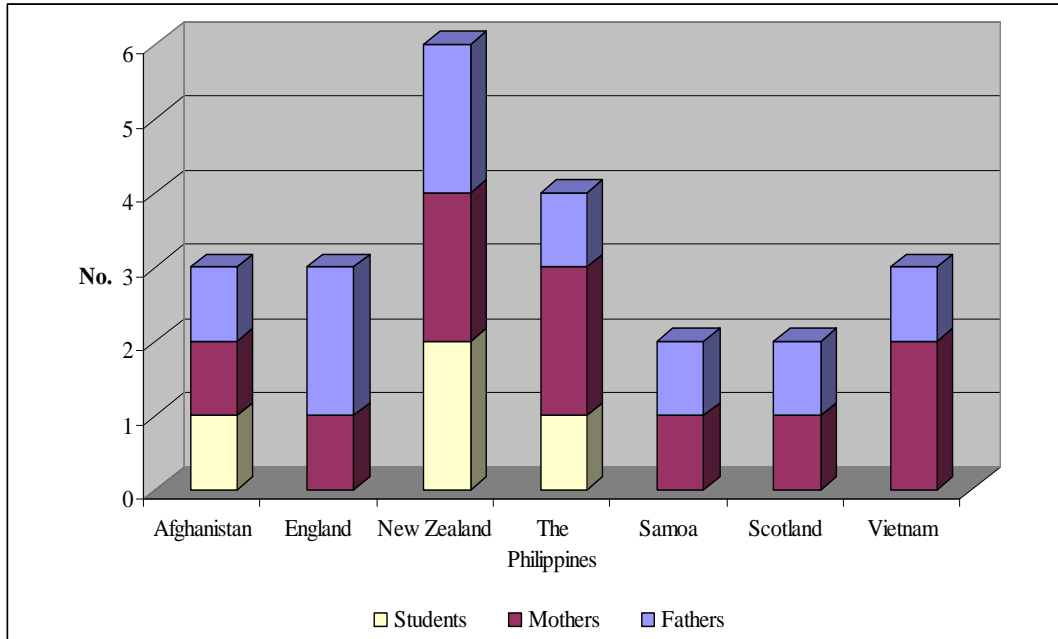


Figure 2: Country of Origin (overseas-born students and parents)



All but two of the respondents reported speaking English at home. Of the remaining two, one spoke both English and Tagalog (one of the major languages of the Philippines), while the other spoke Persian and Dari (a dialect of the Persian language, spoken in Afghanistan) but not English. Nine of the respondents (six female, three male) were the oldest in the family, while five (three female, two male) were the youngest. Two (both female) reported being the middle child, while the remaining two (both female) were only children. The cultural diversity of this class stood out, and it must be noted that some of the students who elected not to participate in the study have cultural backgrounds which are not represented in this sample.

Student responses regarding personal characteristics (Figures 3 and 4) and behaviour (Figures 5 and 6), as recorded on a five-point rating scale, were summarised according to gender. While gender difference was not significant in the response pattern, females generally showed a greater range of responses than males. Generally, the class could be characterised as happy and organised, but lacking in confidence. Very few of the students reported feeling angry or rebellious, with a mere 8% of females claiming they experienced occasional anger. The dimensions of perfectionism and persistence showed the broadest range of responses, with the greater variety amongst female respondents.

Behaviourally, students tended to get along well with others, were more positive than negative in their outlook and unlikely to give up easily. The question of self-doubt brought the greatest variety of responses, with students placing themselves at all points along the continuum. Interestingly, the boys demonstrated a tendency to avoid work, while the girls did not.

Table 1 summarises students' responses to a series of true/false statements regarding different aspects of resilience, and is organised according to those constructs to which the survey questions related: family environment; interactions and support outside the family; optimism and positive attitude; previous history of stress response; service to others and to the community; and self understanding and self esteem. Students typically showed high levels of family support and connectedness, as well as strong connections with other significant adults in their lives. In fact, an interesting trend in relation to family connectedness emerged; in that all of the interview respondents who reported having older siblings also reported that an older brother or sister has assisted in raising them. Furthermore, four of the five students interviewed had younger siblings, and three of the four reported routinely assisting in their care.

Figure 3: Student General Characteristics (females)

I generally feel:

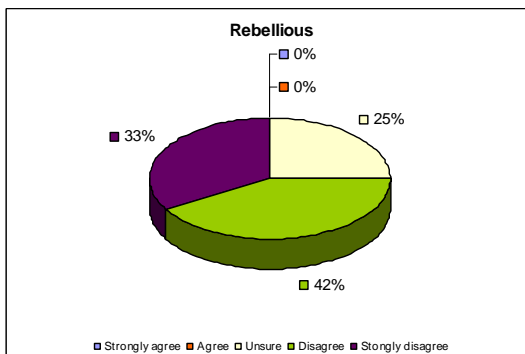
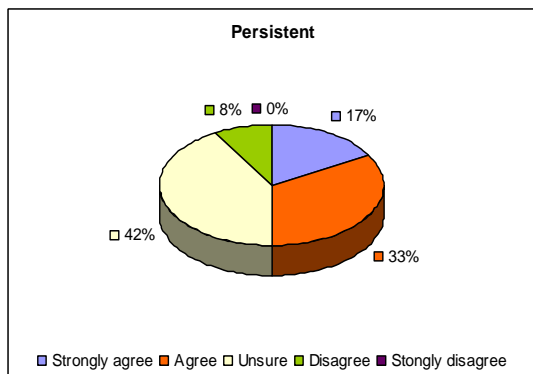
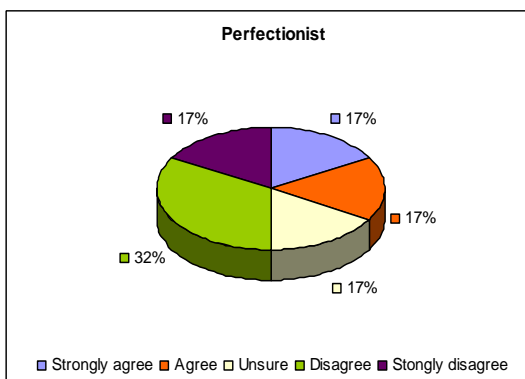
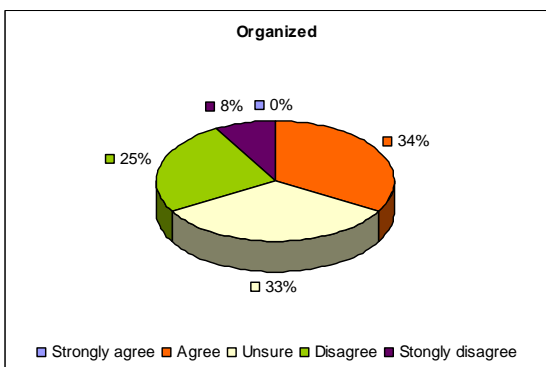
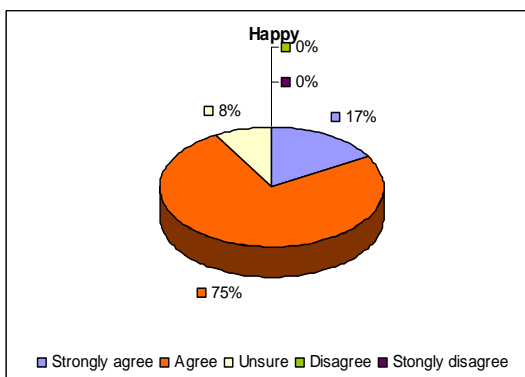
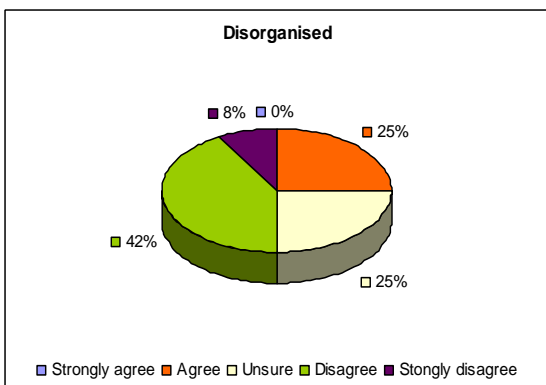
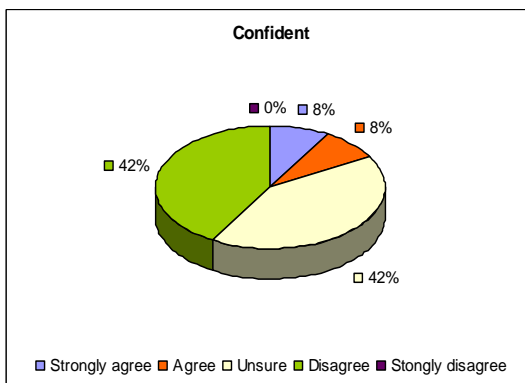
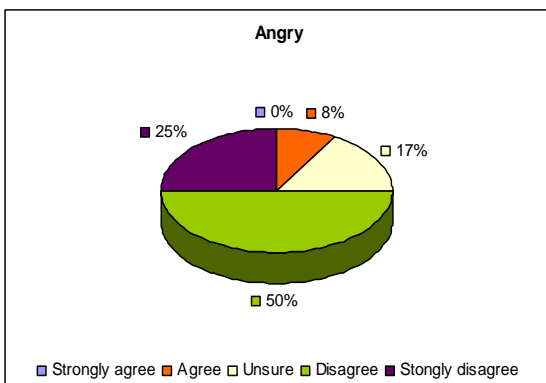


Figure 4: Student General Characteristics (males)

I generally feel:

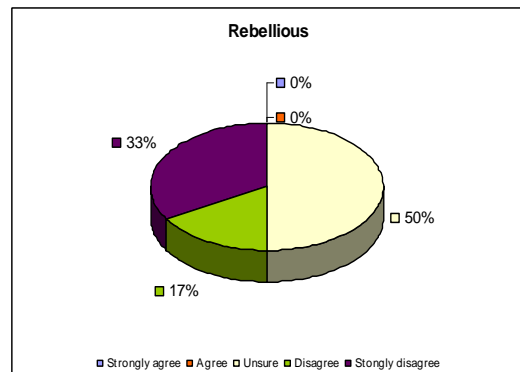
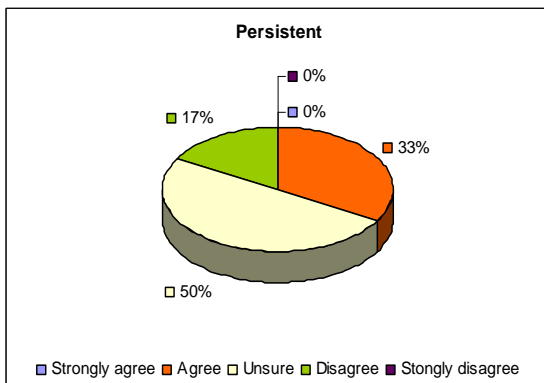
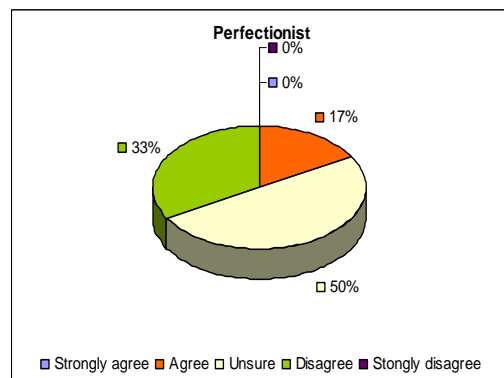
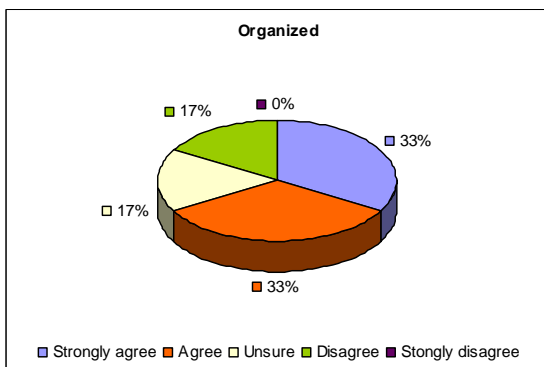
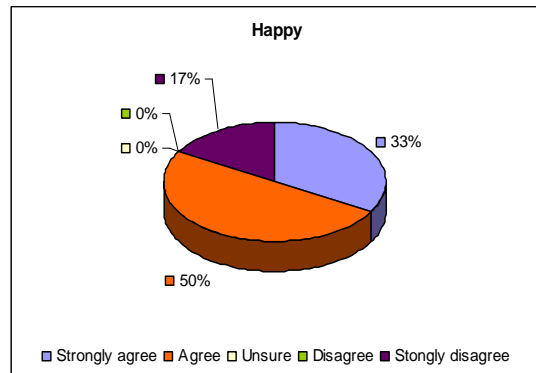
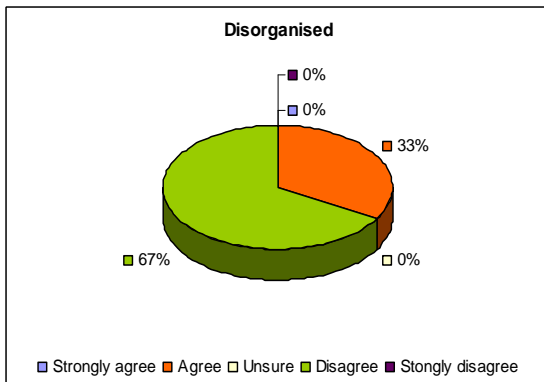
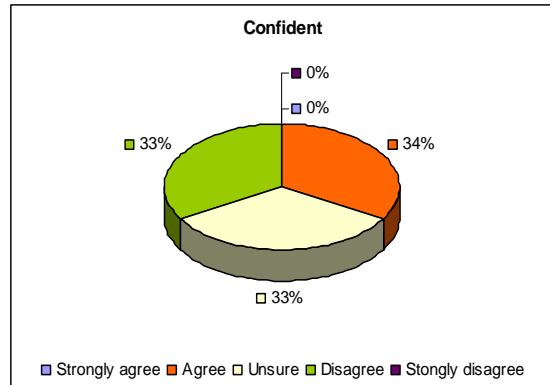
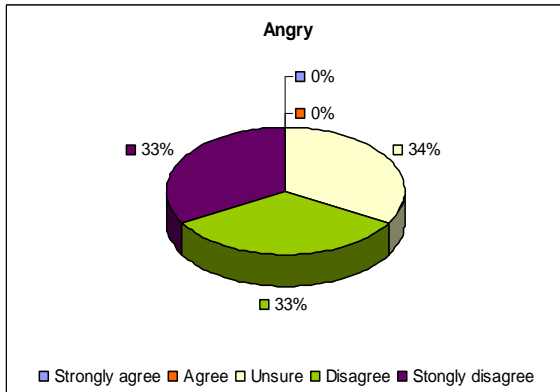


Figure 5: Student General Behaviours (Females)

I generally:

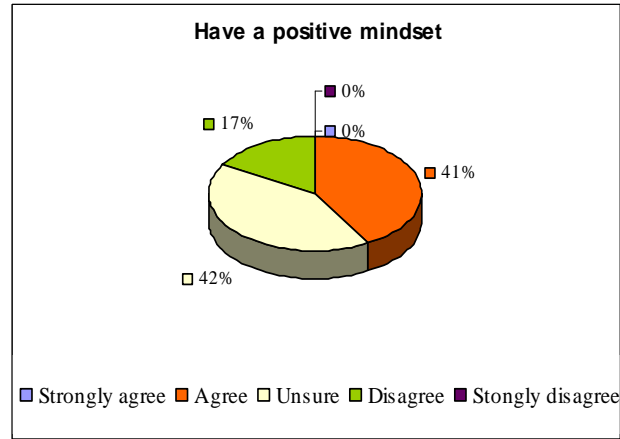
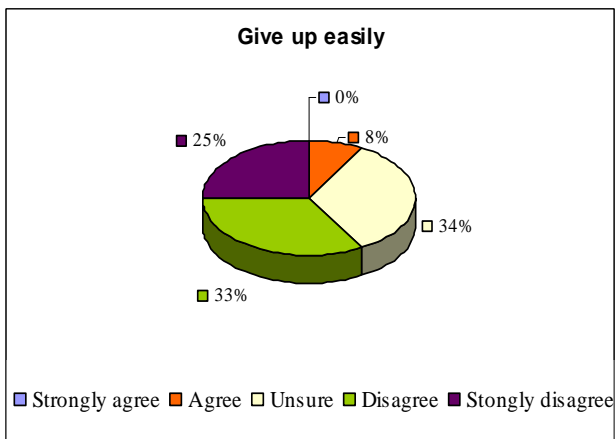
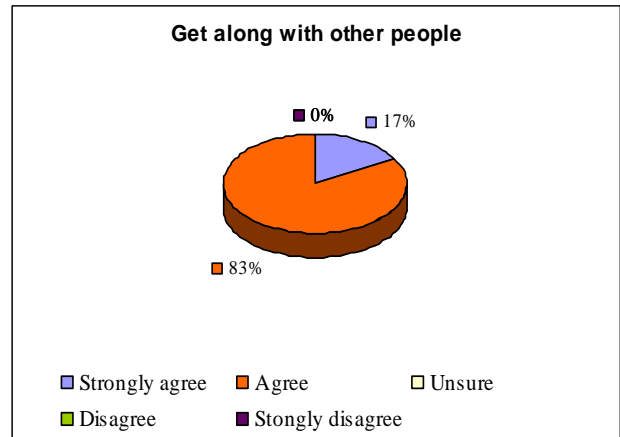
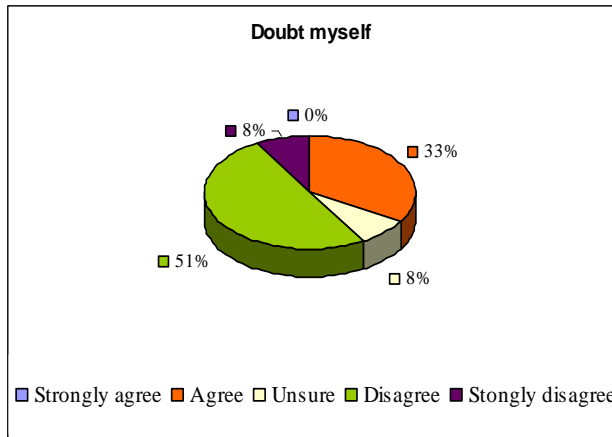


Figure 6: Student General Behaviours (Males)

I generally:

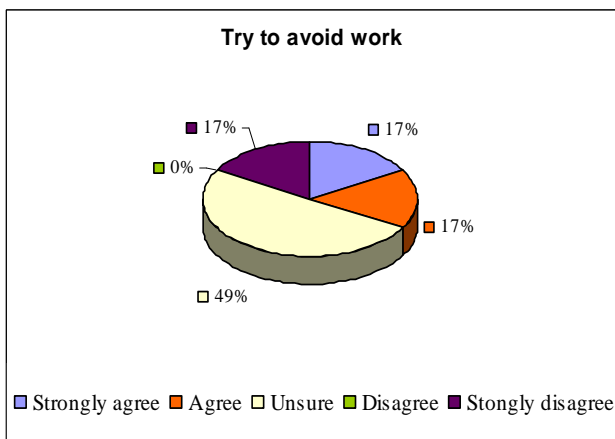
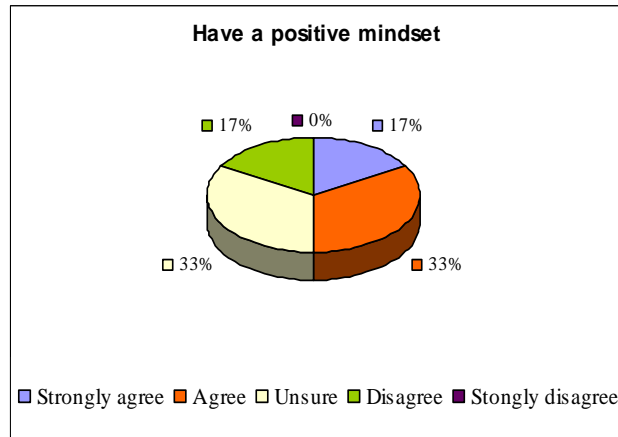
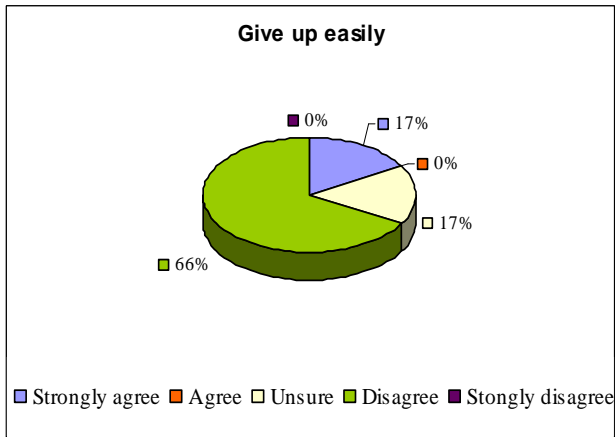
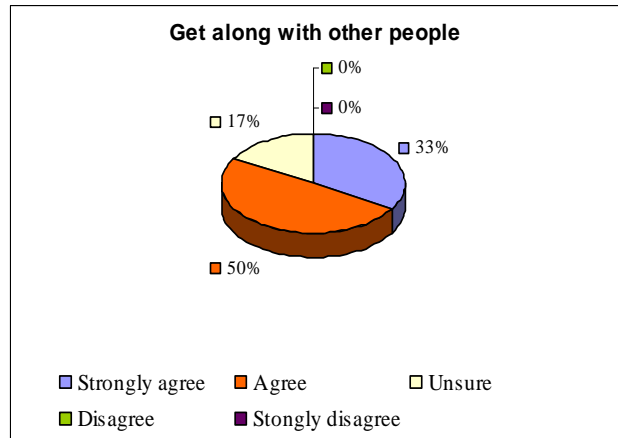
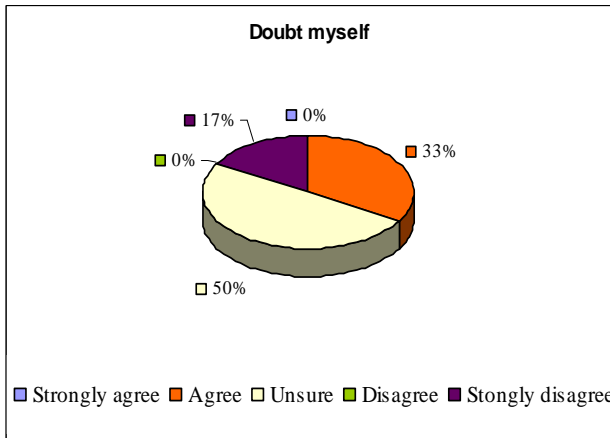


Table 1: Student Resilience – Summary and Overview

Table 1: Student Resilience – Summary and Overview					
		True	False	Undecided	
Family Environment	I can remember my parents telling me what I was like as a baby.	72%	28%	-	
	People have told me how well I slept and ate as a baby.	44%	56%	-	
	I feel like other people in my family expect me to be helpful.	83%	17%	-	
	I know my mother’s age when I was born.	61%	39%	-	
	I know my father’s age when I was born.	56%	44%	-	
	I have brothers and sisters	89%	11%	-	
	One of my older siblings has helped raise me	100%	(if applicable)		
	Our family has clear rules and expectations.	67%	33%	-	
	When I am upset or troubled, there is someone in my family I can turn to for help.	78%	22%	-	
	My family has clear values and beliefs.	61%	39%	-	
	Interactions and Support	My friends and family usually seem happy to see me and spend time with me.	89%	11%	-
Other people would generally say that I am awake and alert.		50%	50%	-	
When I am upset or troubled, there is someone outside my family I can turn to for help.		72%	28%	-	
Optimism and Positive Attitude	I am happy and hopeful most of the time, even when things are difficult.	56%	44%	-	
	I like to try new life experiences.	83%	17%	-	
	I have goals for my life over the next:	one year	67%	28%	5%
		three years	28%	67%	5%
five years		61%	39%	-	
Previous History of Stress Response	I have had to overcome problems or stresses in my life.	72%	28%	-	
	When I am in a stressful, pressure-filled situation, I feel confident I will work it out.	56%	44%	-	
	When I am in a stressful, pressure-filled situation, I feel depressed and hopeless.	17%	83%	-	
	I see myself as confident, even when I am stressed.	39%	61%	-	
Service to Others and to the Community	I feel like I am a helpful person.	67%	28%	5%	
	I feel as if I have a responsibility to help others.	89%	6%	5%	
	I feel as if I have a responsibility to help my community.	39%	56%	5%	
	I can think of a time when I was helpful to others.	89%	11%	-	
Self Understanding and Self Esteem	I am awake and alert most of the time.	82%	28%	-	
	I feel that I understand who I am.	50%	45%	5%	
	I like myself.	83%	12%	5%	
	I liked myself	yesterday	78%	22%	-
		last year	67%	28%	5%
I think I am a confident person.	62%	38%	-		

The majority of respondents had a clear understanding of social boundaries and what was expected of them in a range of contexts, and were able to make constructive use of their time. Students were committed to learning, and socially competent. They generally expressed positive attitudes, a positive sense of identity, and high levels of self-awareness. Most students surveyed reported feeling purposeful, helpful and connected to their community. They had a positive view of their personal future, and experienced high levels of personal power and self esteem. Thus, they tended to set short- and long-term goals for themselves, although very few reported having mid-range goals.

Analysis:

Just as young people generally “do not form a uniform or homogenous social group” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 121), the students who participated in this study represent a fascinating cross-section of the diverse community they represent, and their stories illustrate the potential of the individual to thrive even in the face of overwhelming adversity (Frydenberg, 1977; Stinnet & O’Donnell, 1996). The limited social and economic means of the wider community, however, dictates that the young people in this area have the potential to linger on the edge of a society that sees their peers in more affluent suburbs enjoy much greater access to the material and non-material trappings of contemporary adolescent life. They are often on the wrong side of the digital divide (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007), marginalised by their lack of resources and potentially exposed to significant social and educational disadvantage as a result. Despite the assumption that we live in a technological age (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), for example, many of the students in this community, and specifically in the class from which the subjects were selected, don’t have computers in the home or, if they do, can’t afford the luxury of internet access.

To a certain extent, the globalisation of youth culture (Carrington, 2006; Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; Gidley, 2002) is happening on a larger scale around them, without necessarily involving or including them. Despite its detachment from their field of influence, the global voice of the world’s young people echoes in their ears and their expressions, and there is no doubt that they live in a more globalised context than those in more socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs and communities. For this particular demographic, however, the fast capitalism that characterises the “MilGen” (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007) cannot necessarily be assumed. In spite of this, the students in this study were selected for their demonstrated resilience and success. It is apparent that schooling has, for them, become an opportunity to both negotiate and ameliorate the impact of gender, class, race and other such social divisions (Wyn & White, 1997), with or without personal access to some of the learning tools that others – even their teachers – might take for granted.

the young people in this study are generally representative of Howe’s (2006) profile of Generation Y: all were high achievers, in one domain or another, and the survey responses indicated that the vast majority of students had strong support networks both within the family and beyond it. The students were consistently observed working effectively as a group, actively supporting and encouraging each other on an almost-daily basis. Furthermore, in setting goals for themselves, all of the interview respondents articulated conventional aspirations in keeping with their demonstrated achievement level. While Tiana’s emphasis on teamwork and belonging stood out, all five interview respondents articulated belonging to some form of community group, church group, sporting team or other organisation outside the family and school environment, and regularly engaged in scheduled activities associated with that commitment.

This support and involvement in other activities has served to keep them busy and shelter them, as much as their personal circumstances have allowed, from the negative influences that dominate our modern lifestyle and constitute the myriad risk factors impacting upon young people’s safe and effective progression through adolescence. In keeping with the Generation Y profile, the students generally felt that this level of activity provided a positive pressure which helped them maintain the space and distance required to achieve, and allowed them the opportunity to develop both their ability to prioritise and a wider, more responsive support network. In contrast to Howe’s (2006) profile, however, the survey responses demonstrated significant variability in the students’ levels of confidence, and they presented as being generally unaware of how special they were, either individually or as a member of the larger group.

In terms of the external characteristics over which the students had little, if any, control, some interesting commonalities (trends and truths) also emerged. In support of the survey findings, all five interviewees reported strong family connections, regardless of family composition, and had extensive support networks outside the family. For the most part, they had positive recollections of their early childhood, and came from families in which very clear boundaries and expectations were set and reinforced. In fact, striking similarities existed between the nature of the rules and expectations in all five households. There was, for example, a sustained emphasis on respect for others (particularly adults), respect for learning and respect for the family environment, in that all five students were expected to contribute, in some way, to the smooth running of the household. These findings further reflected the fact that 67% of survey respondents reported having clear rules and expectations within the family, while 61% felt they had strong family values and beliefs.

It is interesting to note, also, that the espoused values of the school, as enacted in the classroom, further support and enhance those promoted in the home. Specifically, the school subscribes to the ideals of respect for self, others, learning and the environment, and these values are explicitly stated in the student diary. They are, furthermore, reflected in classroom practice and referred to by the teacher as the four pillars of respect. Such consistency from home to school, then, appears to have enhanced the cultural capital of these students and, in turn contributed to their resilience.

In terms of the internal characteristics which can be explicitly taught (Bernard, 2002a) and over which the individual does have some control, the students were generally positive, got along well with others, and set clear goals for themselves. They were, furthermore, prepared to work hard in order to achieve those goals and persisted even when things became difficult, often prioritising as a means of enhancing their ability to cope. Interestingly, the survey revealed that while the students did not always feel confident that they would succeed in spite of the difficulties they faced, neither did they report experiencing the feeling that they could not overcome those same problems. Instead, their responses were varied, and failed to suggest any typical pattern as to how previous experiences of, and responses to, stressful situations impacted upon the students in this sample. Further questioning and discussion of this phenomenon in the interview process, however, indicated that the students chose to focus more on working through the issues than on dwelling on how they felt about them, thus giving themselves the emotional distance to cope and, ultimately, succeed.

The respondents' notions of life success consistently related to self-satisfaction with their achievements and the journey they took to get there, rather than to money or any other markings of material wealth. Even more revealing than this, however, were the students' comments about their role models. Consistently and overwhelmingly, they cited their parents, relatives, teachers and friends as role models, shying away from the influence of celebrities, who Annaliese dismissed as "fake". Only Joey mentioned a celebrity role model – not for his celebrity status but his personal characteristics, and then, only after prompting – yet the reasons for his choice echoed the comments made by his peers in their justifications for their selection of their respective role models.

We all have much to learn from this revelation. Too often, we criticise the inappropriate antics of our sporting heroes and artistic greats, based on the assumption that they are role models for our young people. The question remains, however, if young people aspire to be more like their parents and teachers, who is looking to the world's celebrities to act as role models? Is it only those young people for whom no such role model exists in their daily lives, who turn to popular culture and the media to find a substitute, however inappropriate? If this is indeed the case, the message for educators is undeniable. For too long, perhaps, we have underestimated our collective and individual importance in the lives of our students, even those who already have positive adult influences. It is the presence of an actual caring adult (Fuller, 1998) – not a two-dimensional media substitute – in the life of a young person that provides the best protection against risk, and Laura, in particular, called upon middle school educators to take that responsibility seriously. She, along with Tiana and Annaliese, highlighted and reinforced the need for middle years teachers to know and value, honestly and personally, the young people who inhabited their classrooms, and called upon us to assume nothing. Instead, her plea was that we take the time to listen.

Laura's comments not only highlight a number of issues evident in the literature, but reflect Oblinger & Oblinger's (2005) notion that educators should take the time to get to know their students rather than making assumptions about who they are and the type of learning that suits them. This is true at both the institutional level and that of classroom teacher, and is further reflected in the actions recommended

in the *Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* (Education Queensland, 2003). In seeking to better meet the intellectual and socio-emotional needs of today's young people, the educational fraternity must necessarily question our collective view of curriculum and pedagogy. In our rapidly changing and unpredictable world, we need to create an educational climate that contributes to the development of more sustainable futures and is, thus, more life-centred (Hicks, 2002).

In attempting to understand our students as unique and interesting individuals, then, it is incumbent upon teachers to identify and seize upon the "teachable moments" that allow us to point out to our students their socio-emotional strengths and opportunities, and the skill sets they already have but may not have recognized. Through prolonged, consistent, explicit teaching of "psychological literacy" educators can make a profound difference to the life trajectories of their students (Bernard, 2002a), and, thus, the call to integrate socio-cultural and emotional literacies into the curriculum is strengthened. It appears then, from both the literature and from the experiences of the students in this study, that by promoting self-awareness and meta-cognition in our young people, we do indeed empower them to improve their ability to cope with life's inevitable difficulties.

Fuller (1998) identified four main factors which promoted wellbeing in young people: peer connectedness; fitting in at school; feeling loved by your family to the extent that they helped you understand yourself better; and having an adult outside the family take a positive interest in you. The findings of this study, as represented in both the survey and the interviews, and particularly in Laura's comments, resonate with these assumptions and illustrate the value of a strong sense of connectivity and belonging.

In a world where people rush faster and faster, work longer and longer and laugh less and less, it is important to remember that it is our connections to other people that give meaning to our lives. (Fuller, 1998, p. 180)

Further to this, all of the enabling factors (strong family; support system; good teachers; caring adults; role models; and turning points and significant experiences) and coping strategies (perseverance; resistance; friendly competitiveness; faith and spirituality; putting a positive spin on the journey; and creating distance) identified by Aronson (2001) were reflected in the students' descriptions of how they manage the difficulties they faced, and are an important part of their continued resilience.

The skills and resources that adolescents bring to bear on trying to cope with the stressors they face are important determinants of the course of their psychological adjustment during adolescence and adulthood. Efforts to alter stressful conditions, strategies for managing negative emotions experienced under stress, and support received from family and friends will further contribute to successful resolution of stress. (Fuller, 1998, p. 190)

In explaining how young people deal with such complications, Frydenberg described coping as "made up of the responses (thoughts, feelings and actions) that an individual uses to deal with problematic situations that are encountered in everyday life and in particular circumstances" (Fydenberg, 1997, p. 25) and Seiffge-Krenke concluded that "adolescents basically show a high competence in coping with minor stressors" (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p. 129).

The students interviewed as part of this study clearly demonstrated the ability to deal with both the minor daily stressors and more significant, even life-changing, issues. In fact, if anything, they tended to downplay the importance and severity of their problems, suggesting that "depressed and emotionally unstable adolescents, in particular those with negative self-image, reported higher rates of minor stressors and perceived the same problems as considerably more stressful" (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p. 144). This was true even of Annaliese, who simply listed the many issues impacting upon her life, without emotion or any sense of the dramatic. It appears, then, that the positive self-image held by students involved in this study acted as yet another enabling factor, further strengthening and reinforcing their resilience.

Conclusions:

In reviewing the individual stories of these five young people, a number of interesting “truths, trends and gems” emerge, and it is important that the educational community turns the tables, so that these students might become our teachers, even if only for a moment. Their profiles, and those of their classmates, reveal some fundamental, and sometimes unexpected, truths about the realities, lives and perceptions of today’s young people. The strong relationship between the students and their teacher was critical to the success of this study, in that the nature of the interview required an “equality of voice” that can only be achieved when the relationship between researcher and participant is mutually constructed, and founded on trust, care and respect (Gay et al., 2006). It is that relationship which empowered the respondents and enabled them to reflect on, and articulate, the personal characteristics, skills and coping strategies which supported both their academic achievement and their resilience. Two gems arose from their comments: the importance of teachers as significant, caring adults in the lives of even the most successful students, and the value of authentic relationships between teachers and their middle years students. These are the lessons this particular group of young people can teach the educational community.

It remains clear that “successful adaptation in adolescence rather than crisis should be given more prominence in research” (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995, p.1). While there is a distinct need for further study in this area, involving larger sample sizes or more significant periods of time, the worth and value of the findings of this particular study lie in its focus on successful students. Understanding what makes some young people thrive while others in similar circumstances do not, is integral in the goal of middle phase educators to assist all young people to achieve to their potential and, ultimately, enjoy satisfying and fulfilling adult lives.

References:

- Aronson, R. (2001). *At-risk students defy the odds: Overcoming barriers to educational success*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Education.
- Bahr, N., & Pendergast, D. (2007). *The millennial adolescent*. Camberwell, Vic: ACER Press.
- Batten, M., & Russell, J. (1995). *Students at risk: A review of Australian literature 1980-1994*. ACER Research Monograph No. 46. Melbourne: ACER.
- Bernard, M. E. (2001a). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 1, Grades 1-2). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2001b). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 2, Grades 3-4). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2001c). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 3, Grades 5-6). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2001d). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 4, Grades 7-8). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2001e). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 5, Grades 9-10). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2001f). *Programme achieve: A curriculum for teaching students how to achieve success and develop social-emotional-behavioural well-being*. (Vol 6, Grades 11-12). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.

- _____ (2002a). *Providing all children with the foundations for achievement and social-emotional-behavioral well-being*. (2nd ed., rev.). Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- _____ (2002b). *The You Can Do It! Education mentoring program (Age range: 12-18+ years)*. Oakleigh, Victoria: Australian Scholarships Group.
- Call, B. W. (1999). *The effects of Programme Achieve on underachieving middle school students' psychological characteristics*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. California State University.
- Carrington, V. (2006). *Rethinking middle years: Early adolescents, schooling, and digital culture*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Crosnoe, R., & Elder Jr., G. H. (2004). Family dynamics, supportive relationships, and educational resilience During Adolescence. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25(5), 571-602.
- Davey, M., Goettler-Eaker, D., & Henley-Walters, L. (2003). Resilience processes in adolescents: personality profiles, self-worth and coping. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18(4), 347-362.
- Dryfoos, J., G. (1990). *Adolescents at risk: prevalence and prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Education Queensland. (2003). *See the future: The middle phase of learning state school action plan*. Brisbane: Queensland Government.
- Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Sroufe, L.A. (1993). Resilience as a process. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5, 517-28.
- Frydenberg, E. (2002). *Adolescent coping: Theoretical and research perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Fuller, A. (1998). *From surviving to thriving: Promoting mental health in young people*. Melbourne: Australain Council of Educational Research (ACER).
- _____ (2001). A blueprint for building social competencies in children and adolescents. *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling*, 1(1), 40-48.
- _____ (2002). *Raising real people: Creating a resilient family* (2nd edn). Melbourne: Australain Council of Educational Research (ACER).
- Garnezy, N., and Masten, A. S. (1994). Chronic adversities. In M. Rutter, L. Herzov and E. Taylor (Eds.), *Child and adolescent psychiatry* (pp. 191-208). Oxford: Permagon Press.
- Gay, L., R., Mills, G., E., & Airasian, P. (2006). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application (8th ed)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gidley, J. (2002). Global youth culture: A transdisciplinary perspective. In J. Gidley & S. Inayatullah (Eds.), *Youth futures: Comparative research and transformative visions*. (pp. 3-18). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gordon-Rouse, K. A., Bamaca-Gomez, M. Y., Newman, P., & Newman, B. (2001). Educationally resilient adolescents' implicit knowledge of the resilience phenomenon. *Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association*. San Francisco.
- Hicks, D. (2002). A lesson for the future: Young people's concerns for tomorrow. In D Hicks, *Lessons for the future: The missing dimension in education*. (pp. 26-39). London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Howard, S., & Johnson, J. (2000). Young adolescents displaying resilient and non-resilient behaviour: insights from a qualitative study - can schools make a difference: *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*. Australian Institute of Criminology. Retrieved 18 March, 2007, from <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi183html>

- _____ (2006). Eight years on: Trajectories of childhood and adolescent resilience. *Curriculum Leadership*, 4, 1-13.
- Howe, N. (2006). *A generation to define a century*. Paper presented to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference, Worldwide Issues, Chicago, ILL. Retrieved 9 May, 2008, from http://ascd.typepad.com/annualconference/2006/04/a_generation_to.html
- Loukas, A., Suzuki, R., & Horton, K. (2006). Examining school connectedness as a mediator of school climate effects. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 16(3), 491-502.
- Masten, A. S., & Wright, M. O. (1997). Cumulative risk and protection models of child maltreatment. In B. B. R. Rossman, and M. S. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Multiple victimisation of children: Conceptual, developmental, research and treatment issues*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- National Middle Schooling Association (NMSA). (2005). *This we believe: Successful schools for young adolescents*. Moorabbin, Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education.
- Newhouse-Maiden, L., Bahr, N., & Pendergast, D. (2005). Producing resilient middle school students. In D. Pendergast, and N. Bahr, (Eds), *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and assessment* (pp. 77-87). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Oblinger, D., & Oblinger, J. (2005). Is it age or IT? First steps towards understanding the net generation. In *Educating the net generation*. (pp. 2.1-2.20). Boulder, CO: Educase. Online at <http://www.educase.edu/educatingthenetgen>
- Olsson, C. A., Bond, L., Burns, J. M., Vella-Broderick, D. A., & Sawyer, S. M. (2003). Adolescent resilience: A concept analysis. *Journal of Adolescence* 26, 1-11.
- Pendergast, D., & Bahr, N. (2005). *Teaching middle years: Rethinking curriculum pedagogy and assessment*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Schoon, I., Parsons, S., & Sacker, A. (2004). Socioeconomic adversity, educational resilience, and subsequent levels of adult adaptation. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19(4), 383-404.
- Seiffge-Krenke, I. (1995). *Stress, coping, and relationships in adolescence*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stinnet, N., & O'Donnell, M. (1996). *Good Kids: How you and your kids can successfully navigate the teen years*. New York: Doubleday.
- Thompson, R. A. (2006). *Nurturing future generations: Promoting resilience in children and adolescents through social, emotional and cognitive skills*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge.
- Wolin, S. J., & Wolin, S. (1993). *The resilient self: How survivors of troubled families rise above adversity*. New York: Villard Books.
- Wyn, J., & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking youth*. London: Sage Publications.