It is common for young people to succumb to the view that it is not necessary, acceptable or even possible to work hard and achieve high grades, even though these may be important for their personal development and future careers. This view can be combined with the mistaken assumption that it is not possible to achieve academic success while spending time with family and friends and having fun with recreation and entertainment - while leading a balanced life. Young people today have many demands
placed on them and are very conscious of the difficulties they face in their future as well as in the present. Many feel they are unable to take responsibility for their thoughts and behaviour, or decide just to go along with what "everyone else does".

In particular, the social pressures evident in many subcultures of young people are of concern to Australia in the 1990s. These pressures can influence young people to accept negative and destructive peer values and behaviour as normal. They can divert young people from leading a balanced life and aspiring to high achievements, and can lead to drug and alcohol abuse and a lack of faith in themselves and hope for the future. In a school environment influenced by such expectations and negative peer group pressure young people can find it hard to determine their own goals, aspirations, confidence and future perspectives.

This paper provides an early report on a recently initiated project, Operation A Australia, which by creating an alternative group environment and a positive small group culture (what I will call a microculture) provides a way for young people to learn how to resist these pressures and approach the future confidently and positively. I begin with examples of two young people and their way into Operation A.

Tania: What is cool?

Very frequently, cultural pressures, experienced through small group and interpersonal dynamics, are not explicitly acknowledged by individuals, who might not even be aware of them. They can operate below the ordinary level of conscious awareness of the individual, or awareness of them can be suppressed by the individual.

Tania, a Year 9 student, decides to join her friends for activities over a whole weekend, and forego time for study. She never studies on weekends. Tania's thoughts do not include any explicit acknowledgment that the underlying motivation for spending the whole weekend this way is to maintain acceptance of her as a person by her friends, and that her self-esteem and sense of personal security is dependent upon her friends' acceptance of her and what she does. The group values - doing "cool" things together, hanging around together and going out to venues approved by the group - and the norms of solidarity and conformity imply that it is not cool to study during weekends, and that it is an individual and isolating activity. To be cool is to be accepted by the group, to be part of the group and what it does and to have friends who acknowledge you.
Sometimes the norms and values may be made overt, but most of the time are simply taken for granted and function in the student’s mind at an unconscious or preconscious level, as blocks to awareness of options, in this case that there is an alternative which may be in Tania's interest. Consciously, Tania will not acknowledge to herself that such an alternative is being rejected. In fact, Tania does have a reason for choosing the alternative: she has a desire to improve her academic results so as to increase her range of options when she leaves school. But she has not acknowledged that this purpose, and success in pursuing it, is an alternative source of self-esteem, and that planning for it will provide an alternative structure in which she could feel secure and validated. The culture of her friendship group blocks off this route to personal development and fulfilment.

Tania's mother and teachers are advising her to do some study during weekends. This is identified by Tania and her friends as external pressure and adult control, and as based on useless, boring values. So when Tania looks at the study option, she does not see it as an option for her since she will not identify with its source. She falls into the classic teenage trap of confusing help with control - a trap into which teachers and parents can also fall, thus further complicating the issue and exacerbating tension and unnecessary conflict. Finally, Tania becomes confused and unable to locate herself and her own values. The various options and the different levels and clarity of awareness attached to them leave her subject to whatever pressure is strongest at any given moment. Deep down, she does not feel that she is in charge of her own life, and has a nagging anxiety that her future is not secure, either in terms of where she is headed, or what options will be available to her when she leaves school.

Operation A offers Tania the chance to decide for herself what she really wants, irrespective of friends, teachers or parents. It offers a new group of friends, a new culture whose values and norms will support her. Later in Year 9 (1992) Tania joins an Operation A group, which works quite deliberately to make explicit the nature of the choices she can make, and to help her to become aware of the pressures that have been determining her choices, whether consciously or unconsciously. The group, by the way it is formed and operates, "turns the inside out." It has its own cool: when members have had a success they are greeted with "Cool!"

Paul: Am I OK?
One does not have to be a member of a distinct friendship group to be affected adversely by youth cultures. By defining what is acceptable, maintaining clear group boundaries and by exercising cultural power over non members, cultures can contribute to the building up of blocks and negative considerations impeding the personal development and academic progress of individuals. Usually this occurs through invalidation of the individual, his or her identities, aspirations and behaviour.

The way in which macho cultures invalidate those who do not measure up to the required masculine norms is one of the clearest instances of this. The suppressive aspects of such cultures - homophobia (Connell, 1992) - work through the consciousness and values of others, including girls, for example in rejecting anything that smacks of being "gay". Males who are invalidated by people with such an outlook, whether male or female, can identify the invalidation with their whole selves, not separating out their gender and sexuality dimensions, causing a lack of faith in themselves overall.

In Canberra one of the more suppressive cultures is that of the "bombers", who dress in bomber jackets and American baseball caps and adopt a proprietorial and possessive posture towards girls. They consider themselves and are considered by others, as stylish, "with it", strong and attractive. They are "popular". They will threaten males who do not conform to their view of masculinity, and are prepared to assault them physically.

Paul is one male suppressively affected by bomber and similar cultures. Although he has some friends, he is not popular. He is a self conscious student who wishes to do well and go to university after he leaves school, but in Year 9 finds it hard to believe that he can do much better than at present. He is anxious, finds it hard to concentrate, and often sleeps badly because of fears that come into his mind when he goes to bed. He has been encouraged and supported by his teachers, and likes and respects most of them. He tries hard but finds it takes a great effort and gets easily tired and discouraged.

Paul's self consciousness, especially about his masculinity, leads to further distractions and diversions at school. He has a highly sensitive but contradictory and confused set of responses to girls. He likes them, more than he likes boys, and drives himself to be up-front and open with them. Often, though, after rejections and communication failures, he flops back abashed and embarrassed, with giggles, self-denigration and mild resentment towards them when they respond to him in ways he finds hard to handle. Once he is told by one of the younger girls: "You laugh like a girl!" Paul squirms. He is anxious about appearing effeminate, and frequently makes comments dissociating himself
from anything considered "gay".

He dislikes and fears tough macho guys, especially the bombers. One Saturday night in Year 10 Paul gets drunk at a party and is more seriously affected by the fear that he will get beaten up by bombers than the drunkenness itself, although the hangover wipes him out for the whole Sunday. He has been picked on often over the past few years at high school, and has considerable pent up anger at himself for letting this happen, and at his tormentors for doing it to him.

Paul finds it hard to look his teachers and most adults consistently in the eye, and covers his defensive evasiveness with an "I'm OK" manner, often making out that he knows it all already and that he has no problems. It can be harder for adults to crack this facade than for young people.

During Year 9 Paul has had some help from perceptive teachers and has started to work much harder at his studies, with some improvement showing in his results. When he hears of Operation A, at the beginning of Year 10 (1993) he joins the group with great enthusiasm. His self confidence and academic results improve immediately. The group focuses closely on Paul's interactions with others, including the girls, and when communication failures occur they are picked up and cleared up. Paul is encouraged to relax, drop his "I'm OK" facade, and look others steadily in the eye. His concentration and organisation improve and he starts to sleep well.

Tania and Paul represent some of the characteristics and circumstances of young people who come into Operation A. But there are many others and each person has their own story. Some, like Christine, who joins Operation A in Year 11 (1992) have already detached considerably from the negative pressures around them, and are doing quite well academically. By mid 1993, in Year 12, Christine is getting straight As and is at or near the top of her class in all subjects. Wendy is in Year 12 (1993) and very popular. Her task is to detach sufficiently from the subcultural pressures to be in, indeed to lead, everything and to devote sufficient time and energy to study. Nick is in Year 9 (1993) and finding out that it is OK to acknowledge that you like school work and want to do well at it. For Nick, this is part of acknowledging himself and throwing off the habit of shrugging everything off with "I dunno."

Background to Operation A

The Operation A process is based on six years' research on
teenagers' peer groups and youth cultures in Sydney and Canberra. Operation A is a continuation of this research: as well as aiming to help young people, it aims to extend our knowledge of how to help them, and particularly how they can learn. The Sydney research showed the power and subtlety of young people's subcultures in the 15 - 21 age group. It demonstrated how individual young people used the subcultures as sources of solutions to the problems they perceived in their lives. It also revealed how some individuals either reach into a subculture selectively, or detach from it completely, building strong individuality and independence.

The Sydney research on young people was ethnographic, concentrating on description, analysis and deriving recommendations for policy and practice. No interventions were made in the field and no attempts to change culture, attitudes and behaviour were attempted.

The research has included longitudinal case studies demonstrating the influence of youth cultural values and practices and the power of peer pressure in the lives of individual young people, and case studies illustrating the strength of purpose and persistence to achieve characteristic of young people who resist peer pressure or who are members of groups which support individuals in their aspirations (Moran 1984; Walker 1987a, 1987b, 1988). The research has also included work on student/teacher relationships (Crump 1990a, 1990b; Walker 1993a) and youth resistance to authority (McFadden & Walker 1993; Walker 1985, 1986).

The Sydney research occurred through the 1980s. Most recently, in Canberra, the Operation A concept was developed, using action research as well as ethnographic methods. In the Operation A approach, trained group leaders (adults) work with young people to form deliberately a group to support individuals in the pursuit of personal goals which could otherwise be compromised by peer pressure. One group has operated since 1992, one started in 1993. There are plans for more groups to be set up in 1994, in Canberra and in Sydney.

The Operation A Process

Operation A works by creating group unity through explicit and overt agreements, and thereby creates a deliberately constructed microculture. It assumes that to resist negative examples and pressures, and to pursue their own goals, young people need to create a life, here and now, that is satisfying, exciting,
productive and leads to a bright future. Young people need an alternative to thinking that they must imitate their parents or other adults, or accept the norms, values and behaviour of peers.

In Operation A individual young people are invited to join groups whose purpose is to back each other to achieve confidence and competence in decision making, excellence in achieving personal goals, and leading a balanced life. Each individual must be genuinely interested in evaluating their own goals, abilities and performance and the Operation A group process must be suitable for meeting their particular needs. Each group is led by an adult experienced in working with young people and trained in interpersonal communication and group dynamics.

To date two groups have been formed, in Canberra. The students come from four secondary colleges, including government, independent and Catholic institutions, and two high schools, one government and one Catholic. They range from Year 9 to Year 12. Six boys and nine girls have been involved.

The first gathering of the group is devoted to activities at "Silver Wattle", a training centre on a farm on the shores of Lake George, near Canberra provides outdoor training designed to help people to get to know each other, or to get know each other in new ways, to make friendships and to produce group unity and a common purpose. For most of the group this was the first time they met each other. The Silver Wattle format is a journey through the bush, in the course of which the group has to solve certain problems and overcome obstacles using a limited amount of time, information and physical resources. For example, the group must devise a signalling system involving no spoken or written words to convey a map reference to team mates over a distance of 100 metres, surmount an "electrified fence" using three poles and some rope without touching the fence or injuring themselves, and retrieve a container from the middle of a "mined circle" using planks and rubber pads without their feet touching the ground or any of their equipment setting off alarms standing in for mines.

This takes people through a range of cognitive and emotional experiences including having to listen carefully to each other, making decisions under pressure of time, confronting frustration and even despair when there is no apparent solution to the problem, and persisting through until they find one, the elation and relief of finding a solution, and the physical experience of moving through the bush.

After the outdoor course back in the woolshed having afternoon tea, as group leader I gave a brief outline of the proposed
format for the Operation A meetings and sought and won agreement to form a group on the lines outlined above. The approach has worked very well so that Operation A groups by their first meeting, in which they start handling school work issues, already have a "history" and a fund of jokes, stories and shared experiences binding them together.

The enthusiasm generated by Silver Wattle carries over into the further "getting to know you" process at the next meeting when individuals start to share their school circumstances and goals. Each person states what goals they have in life and in particular what they want to get out of their time at school. The leader provides assistance in clarification and formulation of goals. This is then translated into specific goals for school subjects and tertiary entrance rankings if the individual is aiming for tertiary education. We then compare the individual's present level of performance with the level stated in their goals, and what it will take to get from here to there. This project, the simple one of getting from A to B, is an ever present theme in each week's discussion.

During the early meetings, the group leader assists members of the group to develop a clear life planning structure through time management and other techniques. Members plan their forthcoming week being clear about their goals for that week and what it will take to achieve them. As the group progresses the leader provides further training in self management and interpersonal communication, helping members to be aware and confident in the use of their abilities.

The weekly meeting assumes that each individual has set goals for the week and can assess progress. Goals may relate to specific tasks such as completing an assignment, preparing well for a test or examination, or they may involve improvement of relationships and communication between the individual, school friends, parents and teachers. They may include improving one's capacity to study more effectively or to start the day fresh and highly motivated. Goals for one week will often emerge from the experiences, good and bad, of the previous week. At each week's meeting, members share their successes and failures in working towards weekly goals, with the group leader providing structure and facilitating open communication. With guidance from the leader, the group assists each member to identify problems in the way of personal achievement, and to formulate practical solutions. The group also identifies reasons for success and considers what can be learned from them.

The structure of purpose, goals and weekly plans provides a framework within which individuals can locate wins and losses and can rate the overall effectiveness of their performance and judge
whether it is improving, static or declining. The precision with which this becomes possible becomes very clear to each individual when they persist with the endeavour.

I tell everyone that their plan is a mirror of themselves, of how they wish to be in the future, and just as a mirror is an instrument in the improvement of one's appearance, so the plan is an instrument in the improvement of one's performance. If you do not deliberately plan and create your own future, your environment and the people in it will create your future for you. You have the choice of being cause or effect. Operation A is for people who wish to be cause over their own lives.

The application of this framework also provides the source for the "feedback" with which we normally start each session. Sharing wins and losses almost always involves sharing interesting discoveries, or quickly leads to them. It is here that the role of the group leader becomes crucial. The leader must ensure that each individual is getting the most from the group. This means that they must honestly let the group know what is happening in their life, particularly at school. Hesitancy, vagueness, evasiveness, confusion, aggression, defensiveness all suggest that the full and accurate story might not be being told. Sensitive but direct and persistent questioning helps the individual to formulate their experience and to clarify whether it has been a win or a loss, or is indifferent, to them. In other words, it helps the individual to confront reality or, more precisely, to construe reality honestly from their point of view. The group leader is then responsible for contributing himself or herself and eliciting from the group information, experience and practical solutions to any problems which need attention arising from feedback.

Each individual records their academic performance in tabular and graph form so they are able step by step to see the trend of the marks or grades which they are receiving. It is of course not automatically assumed that an upward trend reflects a win. The test for example may have been very easy and the individual's place in class may have dropped so, alongside the graph each event is described by the individual and rated in their own terms as an improvement, a decline or a continuation of current performance level. At every point the individual self-evaluation is crucial. The group leader and others may suggest viewpoints and interpretations but the individual must always accept responsibility for their own performance and their evaluation of it.

Within this framework and apparatus of self-scrutiny individuals
quickly become much more disciplined and focussed in their work. The aim of Operation A of course is to enable them to become as self-motivated and as disciplined as possible. This is made quite explicit to group members. The group leader progressively withdraws from the structuring role, as individuals and the group become able to operate more autonomously.

Each member evaluates his or her own progress throughout the process, and shares this evaluation with the group. This may include consideration of school reports and other feedback on individual performance, as well as the individual's own reflections.

The evidence so far is that the process works on the purely quantitative level. The overall academic performance of every individual has improved given certain ups and downs. Their own motivation and awareness of their own abilities has gone up dramatically and their capacity to receive help and give it to others has increased.

The Focus on Individuals

The Operation A process involves each individual accepting responsibility, becoming an effective decision maker, helping others and receiving their help. The process is highly challenging to members of the group, helping them to see themselves in new ways, and at the same time is strongly supportive, validating their qualities and achievements. It aims to produce quick results in self confidence, self esteem, decision making and personal planning.

Individuals find strength, understanding and assistance in clarifying and pursuing their own personal purposes and goals and assist each other. As they learn the skills to become powerful decision makers in their own lives, and to resist models of behaviour or pressures that would divert or distract them from pursuing their goals, or would corrupt their strength of purpose and clarity of direction, they become able and keen to assist other young people to recognise and develop the positive qualities and skills that will enable them to be balanced and successful in their lives.

Each person agrees to write an open ended evaluation at the end of each semester. These are a selection of comments from the end of Semester 1 1993. (The quoted comments are all favourable. The only negative comments have been that the age range of group members is sometimes too great and the Year 12 people feel held back. In future I will probably not include Year 9 people with
Years 10 to 12.

Stephen, Year 9:

My parents have said that this group has improved my grades immensely. It has been beneficial and I can see improvement in my grades but there is always room for more.

Others say their grades are getting better as they move along. The further they go the wiser they get and know what it means to do well.

Ben, Year 9:

I feel the group has helped me achieve goals even though I'm not that interested in trying that much sometimes.

Jane, Year 12:

Operation A has taught me a lot over the past semester. Not so much about school but about self-related things - motivation, relaxation and how to deal with problems. Getting yourself into order is a great way to start picking up your schoolwork and that is what Operation A has done.

I enjoy the group and hope we stay together. It's good having support and acknowledgment away from family, friends, and school. It is also good having fresh ideas to deal with problems.

Christine, Year 12:

Over the past one and a half years I have been part of the Operation A team. The communication, encouragement, and support I have received from the Operation A team members have been tremendous.

I have used the time management training, assignment and exam planning, the record of achievement, the communication and team unity to continually improve all areas of assessment and to achieve astounding results. I have set my goals, and due to the help from Operation A am bringing them to a reality.

I have become more disciplined with my attention and am in better communication with all of my teachers. My ability in receiving information, understanding it and asking questions has increased.

Now, with one semester to go, the Operation A training and, as I set my sights for the top, anything is possible.
The future

A new cultural form has been established, based on a common purpose to back individual purposes and to make overt all assumptions, norms and values. The members of Operation A groups have developed strong loyalties to and friendships with each other as well as experiencing greater success and fulfilment in achieving their personal goals. The culture is open to help, new information, challenges and criticism from any source, including teachers and parents.

A key to the process is obviously the quality of adult leadership in the groups, especially in the early stages. I have led the two groups so far; the next step is to share the experience in the training of further leaders and to explore the implications for the education of teachers, as well as the creative potential of young people themselves in improving the quality of education, and of life, in our schools. The most exciting thing, from my point of view, is the hope and strong sense of purpose with which Operation A group members now look to their future.

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