

Teachers' Thinking about Childhood Resiliency: Preliminary Impressions from a Qualitative Study

Bruce Johnson, Sue Howard, John Dryden

Faculty of Education

University of South Australia

&

Kaye Johnson

Principal, Riverdale R-7 School

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INTRODUCTION

Considerable research in the United States has been conducted into childhood resiliency - the capacity some children have to successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and to develop social competence despite exposure to severe stressors. In this paper, we present a brief review of the most influential literature in the area and identify a number of tentative and preliminary insights into teachers' thinking about the nature of childhood resiliency, based on qualitative research conducted in South Australian schools during 1997.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Each year, increasing numbers of young children are viewed as vulnerable when entering schools - arriving from circumstances and with needs that schools are not resourced (or in some cases are unwilling) to accommodate. Many of the difficulties faced by these children impact negatively on their behaviour and performance at school. The results include, among other things, higher levels of student disruption at increasingly younger ages and correspondingly higher levels of teacher stress in South Australian schools (Adey, Oswald, & Johnson, 1991; Oswald & Johnson, 1996).

Historically, these students have been labelled by educators as being 'at-risk,' a term adapted from the medical field and used educationally to encompass a wide variety of perceived present and future dangers, including a high risk of school failure, addiction to drugs and alcohol, dropping out of school, failed relationships, criminal activities, unemployment, ill health and early death.

However, a focus on 'at-riskness' in schools has failed to produce significant gains in the identified population. In addition, students labelled by schools as vulnerable or at-risk are primarily those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures often do not match those of the dominant culture that schools were designed to serve and support. As it became obvious that large numbers of these students were not achieving at minimally acceptable levels, and were displaying disruptive behaviours as

consequence, it seemed natural and certainly easy to define the problem as arising from deficiencies in the students themselves (Goodlad & Keating, 1990).

This approach, based on a deficit model of students leads educators and policy makers to devise programs to identify the various ways in which children need to be changed in order to fit into existing school structures and programs (Goodlad & Keating, 1990). Even more problematic, this early categorising of students often has the effect of lowering teachers' expectations of what students have the potential to achieve and often places students in the position of being blamed for poor school performance on the basis of characteristics over which they have no control.

Given the flaws in a deficit model, a body of research that began in the 1950s and focuses instead on assets in individuals and systems is just beginning to make inroads into educational thinking. Through a series of longitudinal studies in the 1960s and 1970s, some researchers began to comprehensively study young children who were classified as being in high risk categories due to a variety of individual, family and environmental factors (eg, neonatal stress, poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, war, alcoholism and criminal activities). The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the connection between risk factors and the development of individual disorders (Benard, 1991).

Three of the most comprehensive studies of at-risk children were undertaken by Werner and Smith (1989), Garmezy and Rutter (1983) and Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979). Werner studied over 600 youths in Kauai, Hawaii, beginning with their births in 1955 and continuing over the next 32 years. Garmezy and his associates studied over 200 children from an urban setting in mainland United States. Rutter studied children from inner city London and the Isle of Wight. Studying these children over time, all three researchers noticed a similar pattern - apparently the majority of children, despite the high risk environments in which they grew up, developed into healthy competent young adults.

The work of Werner, Garmezy and Rutter has been followed by other researchers such as Emory Cowen, James Garbarino, Richard Jessor, Sandra Nettles and Linda Winfield. They have continued to explore the construct of resilience, the term used to describe a set of qualities, or protective mechanisms that give rise to successful adaptation despite the presence of high risk factors during the course of development (Benard, 1991). These later studies continue to confirm earlier findings that a significant number of children from high risk situations have demonstrated this remarkable capacity for resilience in the face of apparently overwhelming odds.

As a result of their studies, Werner and Smith (1989) do not see a tragic outcome as inevitable even for children in high risk environments. Instead, they offer significant hope for the healthy

development of the majority of children in such environments and

conclude that:

¥ most children have self righting tendencies;

¥ competence, confidence and caring can flourish even under adverse
circumstances;

¥ positive relationships have a more profound impact than do specific
risk factors;

¥ it is never too late to change a life trajectory;

¥ a focus on protective factors provides a sense of optimism.

Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) caution, however, that resiliency is not necessarily a discrete quality that children either possess or do not possess. Children may be more or less resilient at different points in their lives depending on the interaction and accumulation of individual and environmental factors. The labelling of children as 'resilient' can be, therefore, as dangerous and misrepresentative as 'at-risk' labels placed on children in deficit models.

Rutter, et al. (1979) note that no person is invulnerable and, as such, 'intervention may be conceived as an attempt to shift the balance from vulnerability to resilience, either by decreasing exposure to risk factors and stressful life events, or by increasing the number of available protective factors' (Werner, 1990).

Internal protective factors that consistently appear in the literature in describing the common personal characteristics of the resilient

child are:

- ¥ social competence;
- ¥ problem-solving skills;
- ¥ autonomy;
- ¥ sense of purpose and future.

External protective factors have been described in relation to three primary systems in the child's world:

- ¥ family;
- ¥ school;
- ¥ community.

Within each of these systems, the same three sets of factors have been identified as contributing to the development of resiliency:

- ¥ caring and support;
- ¥ high expectations;
- ¥ participation and involvement

(Benard, 1993).

Although all three factors have been identified as critical for the development of resiliency, Rutter (1979) argues that caring and support across all three external systems is the most critical variable throughout childhood and adolescence. Caring and support establishes the basis for trusting relationships throughout life, a factor identified earlier by Erikson (1963) as the foundation for healthy future development.

These attempts to identify and quantify protective factors in individuals, families, schools and communities, have prompted some researchers to urge caution over their application. Garmezy (1994) sees a danger in the possible representation of the findings as validating the 'American Dream', the mistaken view that any person, irrespective of background or environment can succeed if they only work hard enough. Benard, (1993) shares that concern in fearing that

the movement toward resiliency - toward creating family, school, and community environments rich in the protective factors of caring, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation - not dissolve into more add-on, quick-fix programs and strategies.

(Benard, 1993: 10)

It is clear that the twin constructs of 'resilience' and 'risk' in relation to children's life trajectories have been canvassed extensively in the research literature of the last two decades. It is important to now consider whether there is justification for more research on the same theme; what can be borrowed usefully from previous research and what needs to be challenged or discarded.

To date, no comprehensive studies on the construct of resilience have been published in Australia. With the exception of the important work done by Rutter and his colleagues in England (Rutter, et al., 1979), the bulk of the literature about childhood 'resilience/risk' comes from the United States. While there is much here that has resonance for us,

there is no reason to suppose that research arising out of North American social organisation and conditions would be directly applicable to Australian contexts. While the US and Australia are both multicultural, multiracial societies, the patterns of privilege and disadvantage emerge differently in each country; we cannot assume that research conducted in, say, urban Minneapolis, will be relevant to children and schools in suburban Adelaide or downtown Brisbane. Accordingly, the research project outlined in this paper, aimed to investigate the issue of childhood resilience in an Australian setting, drawing on the strengths of previous work, modifying it and adapting it for local conditions and using constructs and definitions that have meaning for local people.

METHODOLOGY

Bearing in mind our concerns about some of the published literature on resilience, we aimed to design a research project that had local significance in an economically depressed area of Adelaide (the suburb of Salisbury 20 km north of the CBD), which avoided approaches that:

¥ unquestioningly replicated overseas research;

¥ were predicated on normative definitions of 'resiliency' and 'at

riskness' rather than on context-specific, grounded and multi-faceted

constructions of the notions by those involved in the research;

¥ denied or avoided addressing the complexity of research into

resiliency;

¥ failed to problematise the key issues and assumptions of resiliency

research;

¥ were under-theorised in the sense that they were preoccupied with

'practical' intervention and measurable outcomes;

¥ lacked authenticity in the sense that they promised sanitised

outcomes that reflected virtue and hope rather than the realities of
struggling against adversity;

¥ were motivated by commercial, rather than intellectual, interests.

The consequences of rejecting these approaches meant that we were
committed to a research process that:

¥ was contextualised within, and focussed on an Australian urban
community;

¥ explored multiple conceptions of resiliency;

¥ took account of the complexity of social systems by exploring the
inter-related, dynamic, and sometimes oppositional forces that shape
childhood resiliency;

¥ moved the focus of interest in resiliency away from short-term,
usually simplistic interventions in children's lives, to a more indepth
understanding of the complexity of the issues surrounding at-riskness
and resiliency;

Details of the research undertaken in 1997 are presented below.

Phase 1. An Investigation of the Construction of the Concept of
Resiliency by Teachers and Children

One difficulty with most of the previous research into childhood resiliency is that it relies on a common understanding of key concepts, such as 'resiliency' and 'risk'. However, there is a vast literature suggesting that children and adults do, indeed, make sense of the world and interpret phenomena quite differently. It is self-evident that the different ways in which individuals construct the world will influence how they will respond to any kind of interventionist program.

This phase of the research investigated how teachers and students construct and understand the notion of childhood resiliency. Small group interviews were conducted with one hundred and twenty five, 9 - 12 year old children drawn from 5 Primary schools in the Salisbury area. Teachers in each school nominated twenty five students whom they perceived to be a representative cross-section of children in their classes. In groups of 3 or 4, children were asked questions about 3 broad issues:

- ¥ What makes 'life tough' for some children;
- ¥ What 'doing OK' in life means;
- ¥ Why some children with a 'tough life' seem to 'do OK' while others don't.

(see figure 1)

Twenty nine teachers from the five schools were also individually interviewed about the same issues using the same interview protocol as that used with the students.

Phase 2. A Comparative Analysis of the Life Perceptions of Children displaying Resilience or Non-Resilience at School

The purpose of this phase of the research was to provide children who were identified as exhibiting 'resilient behaviours' or 'non-resilient behaviours' with the opportunity to talk about their lives. Teachers in 10 different Primary schools in the Salisbury area were asked to use a screening device (see figure 2) to identify up to 6 children aged 9-12 years who were exhibiting 'resilient behaviours' and 6 children who were displaying 'non-resilient behaviours'. While negotiating parental consent proved to be problematic, despite the strong support of school personnel, a total of fifty five children were subsequently individually interviewed at their schools.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Identifying 'at-risk' children
who are either displaying
'resilience' or 'non-resilience'

Using the 'This Is Your Life' TV program as a stimulus, children were asked to talk about the kinds of things that would be included in their 'Book' if they were the special star of the show. Children were prompted with questions including the following:

¥ What important things have happened to you in your life?

- ¥ Who are the important people in your life and why?
- ¥ How do you like to spend your time?
- ¥ What do you like about your life?
- ¥ What are you proud of in your life?
- ¥ Have you any regrets about your life?
- ¥ What are your plans for the future?
- ¥ What do you think may help you achieve your plans?
- ¥ What may stop you from achieving your plans?
- ¥ What advice would you give other kids about life?

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

We knew when we planned the research that we would collect a great deal of qualitative data that would present us with logistical and conceptual challenges related to data management and analysis. In response to these challenges, we established a comprehensive NUD¥IST (QSR, 1997) project containing all of the interview data and a very preliminary indexing scheme based on the range of questions - and responses - raised during the interviews. However, before we became immersed in the fine detail of the transcripts, we deliberately spent time formally capturing what we saw as the 'first wave' of analysis - that initial, impressionistic and very powerful attempt to make sense of what our respondents were telling us during interviews.

We suspect that many qualitative researchers probably underestimate the importance of this stage of analysis as they move quickly on to the

analysis of their 'real' data - the very tangible text that is produced from their interviews and field work. In comparison with this data, researchers' first understandings, impressions, guesses, hunches, and dare we suggest, feelings are very ephemeral and quickly lost as other research tasks take over their attention. Yet they are a crucial source of insight that can act as a well grounded descriptive and explanatory framework on which increasingly detailed cycles of analysis can be based.

We tried to capture this early period of analysis by doing the following:

- ¥ we formally 'de-briefed' with school personnel to discuss our impressions, ask questions about particular interviewees, and raise issues that emerged during the interviews;
- ¥ we wrote brief reflective 'memos' - little notes to ourselves - about any issues and ideas we thought were significant to the study;
- ¥ we made a point of informally discussing our thoughts with other members of the research team soon after completing a series of interviews;
- ¥ perhaps most importantly, at the conclusion of all interviews and before we became distracted by the demands of close data coding using NUDIST, we participated in a half-day long, free-wheeling reflective discussion about our thoughts and impressions of the research. This discussion was audio-taped, transcribed, and used as the basis for further debate, clarification and deliberation.

It is on the basis of this 'first wave' of analysis that we present our

insights into teachers' thinking about the nature of childhood
resiliency and the factors that seem to influence it.

PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH

1. An emerging understanding of the concept of resiliency

Based on many interviews with teachers and groups of students in the Salisbury area, we attempted to distil a few defining characteristics of 'resilient' and 'non-resilient' behaviours evident in students who attended the participating schools. While we wanted to avoid reproducing an Australian version of the strongly normative and absolutist North American conceptions of resiliency that are so prevalent in the literature, we nevertheless wanted to explore teachers', students' and our shared meanings of the notion and to tease out any differences between them.

Our first attempt at proposing a tentative definition of resiliency and non-resiliency was driven by the pragmatic need to recruit participants for the second phase of the research involving children who were deemed to be exhibiting behaviours consistent with either resiliency or non-resiliency. Briefly, it was proposed that 'at risk' children who displayed resiliency seemed to be:

¥ friendly, sociable, and able to make friends;

¥ able to relate well to adults;

¥ generally happy;

¥ positive about themselves;

- ¥ able to make responsible choices in life;
- ¥ involved in school life;
- ¥ 'in control' of their lives;
- ¥ able to plan for the future - to have dreams and goals;
- ¥ loved unconditionally by someone.

In contrast, at risk children who displayed non resiliency seemed to be:

- ¥ socially isolated with few friends;
- ¥ negative about themselves;
- ¥ unable to accept responsibility for making choices in life;
- ¥ victim oriented, tending to blame others for their predicament;
- ¥ impulsive, unpredictable, and sometimes violent;
- ¥ disengaged from school life;
- ¥ present oriented in that they 'lived for today' without regard for the future.

These definitions were presented to school personnel as bi-polar categories at the extreme ends of a 'doing OK - not doing OK' continuum. All schools accepted the definitions as largely unproblematic, and applied them without apparent difficulty during the selection process for phase 2 of the research. However, it wasn't until interviews were underway with the children that anomalies began to appear between the nominations of school personnel and our impressions of the characteristics of the children that were revealed during the interviews. While there was agreement about most children, there were a few surprises. A proportion of children who had been

nominated as 'non-resilient' appeared to be the very opposite during interviews; they appeared to possess inner strength, know what they wanted in life, have several close and loyal friends, and were able to talk about how they coped with stressful aspects of their lives.

In subsequent discussions with school personnel, we realised that we, and they, implicitly applied other discerning dimensions to the concept of resiliency, particularly when using the notion to try to make sense of the ways children coped with aspects of their 'tough lives'. These other aspects of the notion remained largely hidden until we tried to reconcile some of the contradictory and oppositional discussions that took place over particular children and their perceived 'resiliency' or 'non resiliency'. These 'implicit' dimensions of resiliency were related to:

¥ different contexts;

¥ different time frames;

¥ different ends, outcomes, or 'desirable' life experiences or states.

The first unrecognised dimension related to the different social contexts in which children 'live' - the school, the family, the peer group, and the broader neighbourhood and community. School personnel located their conceptions of resiliency strongly within the school context by drawing on evidence of 'coping' with the social and academic demands of the school. In these cases 'resiliency' was often equated with cooperativeness, happy compliance with school routines and procedures, sociability, and at least moderate levels of academic

success. In contrast, 'non resiliency' was often associated with uncooperativeness, defiance, social isolation, 'grumpiness', and poor academic performance 1.

We were also unclear of the contextual dimension inherent in our own conceptions of resiliency. For example, most of us encountered children who seemed to have exceptional personal strength and determination - 'grittiness' and 'toughness' were the terms we used in our post-interview discussions - attributes that we associated with 'resilience' in a threatening and stressful broader community. We were subsequently surprised when these students were deemed to be 'non resilient' by their teachers due to their defiant behaviours at school. We were implicitly locating our conceptions of resiliency in a wider context than the teachers.

As we sought to further clarify what appeared to be contradictory conceptions of resilience, it became apparent that the notion was also being applied across different time frames, again implicitly. For example, some teachers spoke of children being resilient now, whereas others were reluctant to use the term without projecting into the future to predict what might happen to the children in adolescence and adulthood. It was almost as if the term had no currency without some link to the future; no pronouncements could be made about the resiliency of particular children until some future time when their 'fate' would be known.

Related to this were implicit beliefs about what kind of future was 'desirable' for these children and the broader society they would join. The term 'resiliency' was frequently imbued with teachers' largely middle class values about the desirability of children growing up to be happy, educated, socially well adjusted, non-violent, employed, 'married with kids' clones of their teachers.

Initially, we were privately critical of teachers' very middle class construction of 'resilience', as we saw it as the unfortunate flip-side of the insulting 'cultural deficits' view of 'disadvantaged children' popular in the sixties and seventies. It seemed that our teachers were just as willing as their American counter-parts to appropriate the 'feel good' language of resilience to reassert the importance of aspiring to the great 'Australian Dream'. However, as we debated the origins and impact of hegemonic values in our schooling system, we were forced to concede that the whole notion of resilience was meaningless without reference to some socially constructed conception of what was 'good' for children. While we accepted the death of meta-narratives - the universal, foundational bases of social morality - the alternative relativist position wasn't attractive either.

We took heart with Cohen's (1993) counter to the relativism of post modernism by conceding that moral absolutism is no longer tenable, but that some core values - albeit, socially constructed - should be reasserted to underpin a collective understanding of what outcomes, life experiences or states are more 'desirable' for children than

others. We embraced a number of widely accepted 'good outcomes' relating to children's health and welfare. At this stage these have a distinctly Maslowian heritage and include:

- ¥ good physical health;
- ¥ personal safety;
- ¥ emotional security;
- ¥ positive personal relationships;
- ¥ engagement in purposeful activity.

While our position is as vulnerable to de-construction as any other, it represents a base position from which justifications of resilience promotion initiatives may proceed tentatively in an increasingly sceptical post modern era. While moral certainly has evaporated, we think that it should not be superseded by a form of moral, social and educational paralysis brought on by the 'precious nonsense' (Norris, 1992: 17) of uncritical post modernism.

Having worked through this philosophical minefield, we were in a position to see more clearly (and perhaps with less approbation and censure) the way different beliefs were manifest within different conceptions of resilience. This helped us view resiliency as a multi-faceted construct that contains many moving elements that need to be explicitly analysed when it is used as a conceptual tool in discussions about student welfare. We concluded that 'resiliency' is an allusive notion that slips between contexts and time frames, and is driven by quite powerful beliefs about what is 'good' for children and

society more broadly.

2. Factors that influence resiliency: Contrasting home and school values

In considering their students, teachers were quick to identify a number of structures and programs within schools that they deemed to promote resiliency. Several programs were named by teachers, including: peer support, multi-age grouping, classroom meetings, protective behaviours, early intervention and secondary transition. Teachers also referred frequently to ideals such as empowering students, implementing social justice initiatives and involving parents in the life of the school.

Quite often during the interviews, teachers spoke freely in educational generalities about the potential impact of programs, principles and ideals. The litany of 'education speak' is highlighted by one teacher's words:

I believe that schools need to recognise that the relationship between the teacher and the learner is the single most important factor in learning. That it is school that has . . . a success-oriented culture. That programs for children are individualised . . . and that competition, student against student is not eliminated completely, but played down so that collaborative and co-operative activities. . . are foremost. So yes. . . it's the self-esteem stuff . . . which I guess leads on to programs where students are assisted to manage their own

behaviour rather than having external expectations forced upon them, and I think that then assists children to sort out their own difficulties and gives them power to do that. I think operating from a system of recognition for achievement rather than reward, so that children come to see that success in the process . . .

And yet beneath the promise of these programs and principles bubbled a disquiet about the nature of the impact within the community.

Numerous times throughout the interview process, teachers raised doubts about the degree to which any program was impacting on the development of student resilience without consideration of other underlying factors unique to the child and the community. One teacher suggested that 'this is probably why programs aren't working because we are relating to the whole group and it is not specifically relevant to this child, that child or the community.'

Beneath the 'education speak' teachers qualified their talk of success with disclaimers such as the ability to 'only do so much considering their situation' and a 'no-care attitude' to schooling. They struggled over 'how much we can really do' and 'a lack of expectations from home.' They talked frequently of cultural deficits at home that contributed to the difficulty or inability of schools to successfully promote resilience in children. While several raised concerns about cultural deficits at home, none discussed the home cultures from a position of richness or strength. And companion deficits in the school

culture were not spoken of. In MacLeod's (1987) study of youth from low-income neighbourhoods, he argued that 'the problem is not that lower-class children are inferior in some way; the problem is that by the definitions and standards of the school, they consistently are evaluated as deficient ' (p. 99). This attitude may be reflected in the interviews with some teachers in this study.

However, while home was viewed as a deficit culture more often than not, many teachers expressed a deep care, concern and struggle with the necessity of finding ways of incorporating the home culture into the life of the school:

So a teacher who does not value what those kids bring to school, value themselves as individuals and work from where those kids are at, and try to build upon that. The worst thing would be to just devalue all of that and say, 'These kids are useless, they're not going to get anywhere.' It's an awful thing to do and say. I think we have to be really aware that what we perceive and what we value, is not necessarily what these children, and what the families of these children value. So it's just getting to know the community.

One difficulty with incorporating the home culture is the largely middle class values brought to the school by the teachers who are employed to set up the structures, programs and routines designed to meet the needs of the children who come from these homes. Several teachers referred to this difficulty. One expressed a 'hope that we

are not putting forward our sort of middle class values' and an accompanying belief that 'I don't think so. I think that we are just teaching people how to get on in groups.' This teacher was not alone in arguing for the possibility of 'values-free' teaching. Perhaps more realistically, another teacher eloquently described the dilemma in this way:

I think the best thing that we as teachers can do, and I get caught because obviously I've got middle class values and ideas, and they are very different to what some of these kids value and their experience. I think the challenge for us as teachers, is to let that go, and that's really hard because that's everything that's inside of us, and everything that we value, and it comes down to just the listening to the kids, talking with the, and supporting them in their ideas and just helping that to go further. But the middle class values that we hold, they do have to be suspended so that when we do work and talk with these kids, we aren't left with those judgements that we're going to put on those kids, because that's really damaging.

MacLeod (1987) argues that if schools are ever going to successfully implement the programs and ideals that teachers reflect in 'education speak' that 'what is needed is a comprehensive analysis of how the educational system's curricula, pedagogy, and evaluative criteria favour the interests of the upper classes' (p. 99). Perhaps the personal struggles reflected in the above teacher quote are a part of the discomfort that lives in many teachers working in schools where the

values of the home culture are at variance with the values of the people charged with schooling the community's children.

Lowered aspirations and expectations of students often accompany a view of the home as deficient in cultural capital. Several teachers spoke of their lowered expectations for the children with whom they worked. As one reflected: 'You get to that stage, as much as you keep thinking, 'Yes I make a difference here.' But the end result is that they've left you or the end of the year comes and the child's with all of the things you've tried, you think, there's not really anything that's much different. ' Yet again aspirations, expectations and 'right and just goals' are wrapped up in the competing values of the participants in the process. The measured thinking of one teacher serves to highlight the place of competing values in expectations and aspirations for the children in these communities.

I'm trying to be careful here. They see their parents as, that's the way it is. Now whether they're being educated or not, the behaviour's, they'll follow the behaviours. If their parent's not an educated person and takes anything they can get their hands on, jobwise, that's surviving, they're OK. I've got one lad in my class who has no ambition to do well at school simply because he's just going to go out to the market gardens out the back, and do exactly what the family does. And you try and think, you're only living is, I say, 'Sam, what if a terrible thing, like the bottom falls out of the vegie market, or drought, and you lose your whole crops to the point where the family

can't put the next crop in, what happens with all those unfortunates?

Where do you go then?

Beyond the 'education speak' that flowed freely off the tongue of so many teachers, most also spoke of a genuine disquiet they have with such generalities so oftentimes connected with middle and upper class cultural capital. The place of contrasting home and school cultures, along with accompanying aspirations and expectations appears to be part of a struggle expressed by teachers when discussing the nature of resiliency for children from low-income neighbourhoods.

3. Factors that influence resiliency: 'There's something in them ...'

On our first 'pass' through the data in relation to 'What Makes the Difference?' between resilient and non-resilient children, it was clear that many of the teachers were forming their explanations in terms of 'personal' factors, that is, they were referring to factors 'inside' the children. Particularly when discussing the characteristics of resilient children, the respondents would say such things as 'There's something in them that will help them to survive' (F 30 - 34), 'I think it has to come from within them' (F 35 - 39); 'I think it has probably got a lot to do with your basic make-up, it's not just something that develops necessarily...' (M 40 - 44) or, more poetically ' They can have every opportunity, they can have everything in life that they need, including love and respect and support, but if that fire in the belly's not there, you know sometimes, those kids will never push themselves, will never try and do better than just plod' (F 30 - 34).

As we proceeded, it became clear that this was a very common kind of response. Over and over again, teachers would use psychological, individualistic explanations for what they perceived to be the children's failure to be resilient in the face of life's difficulties.

Many referred explicitly to 'innate' or 'genetic' factors 'Yeah, I reckon there's genetic stuff in there somewhere.' (F 40 - 44); 'They have this inherent ability, strength, gene whatever you want to call it, to just hang in there against the odds.' (F 50 - 54).

A few teachers who referred to environmental factors affecting the child's ability to be resilient, framed their explanations in terms of what they constructed as 'bad' family environments which were in direct conflict with the 'good' school: 'And it does start with the family, because the child won't have a self value, because they can't do without their family. That's what they see, from the time they're born through the first five years, that's their environment, and if that's not right, then there's going to be this self concept straight away that when they come to school it has to be worked on, and reinforced and if it's not right it's got to be tempered or changed somehow. If they keep going back to the same environment that caused the situation, then they're in total conflict with the two places aren't they?' (M 40 - 44) and 'I honestly think it depends on the family, it really is, it is what happens when he leaves here, or when the child, the boy or the girl leaves here. That is where the 'at risk' students either become this way or become this way. With positive inputs at home and in

school they become a happy sort of student and perhaps manage to do the right thing. I think with negativity at home, the kids will go the other way.' (M 45 - 49).

In both instances, the respondents are relying on explanations for non-resilience only in terms of microsystem factors - the child him or herself and the family (Bronfenbrenner 19??). What struck us as remarkable was that only one of the thirty teachers in this part of the study ranged more widely through Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to develop political or sociological explanations for resilience. This teacher apart, no-one suggested that explanations might be found in such factors as social class, race, ethnicity, gender or government policies in relation to employment, education, health or welfare. This is not to suggest that the respondents are unaware of social class, race or ethnicity as phenomena. Throughout their interviews, many teachers were at pains to point out the care they take to avoid imposing their middle class, Anglo-Australian views and values on those children they perceived to be socially and culturally different; they just seem not to see this difference as being implicated in explanations for resiliency.

While we do not wish to speculate too much at this stage of our analysis, there are several possibilities regarding this pattern of profoundly apolitical responses. It may be that this is merely a reflection of the emphasis on the individual in contemporary Western capitalist society. This view holds that people hold they key to their

own destinies and that hard work, determination and the right attitude will bring success; it essentially denies the existence of structural, institutional or systemic disadvantage for particular groups of people. Such a view would explain the teachers' causal explanations relying on individual psychological factors or family-influence factors.

A second possibility is that these responses might be a result of low morale in the teaching force. Increasingly, teachers are asked to do more with less and to provide services for which they have not been trained and feel ill-equipped to manage. Many of the teachers interviewed were engaged in daily classroom struggles with numbers of seriously difficult children. When, despite their best efforts, children do not thrive in their care, there may be some comfort in explanations that site the source of the problem in the child or the child's family.

Given that many teacher education courses have, in recent times, seen the disappearance of what used to be called the 'foundation' subjects, there is perhaps an urgent need to ensure that student teachers are exposed to theory in the philosophy and sociology of education as well as in educational and developmental psychology. It would seem critically important that a clear understanding of the extremely complex interaction between heredity and environment (in its widest sense) and its influence on behavioural outcomes and social power be an essential prerequisite for all teachers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have sought to provide some early and partially speculative insights into teachers' construction of the concept of resiliency and their thinking about factors that may influence it. Our 'first wave' analysis revealed that resiliency is a multi-faceted construct that is difficult to define due to its contextual and time linked dimensions. However, teachers appear to imbue the term with their own mostly middle class values and use it as a neat summarising device to cluster explanations of school success and failure. Teachers mostly embraced 'the liberal-humanist view which individualises social issues and leads away from broader social and cultural considerations' (Cormack, forthcoming). Further analysis of children's constructions of the notion of resiliency will hopefully reveal whether children mirror the dominant values of their teachers, or whether their perceptions reveal alternative views.

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Correspondence

Dr Bruce Johnson

University of South Australia

Underdale Campus

Holbrooks Rd

Underdale SA 5032

Australia

Ph: +61 08 8302 6313

Fax: +61 08 8302 6239

E-mail: bruce.johnson@unisa.edu.au

1. A celebrated exception to this broad depiction of school personnels' decision making occurred at Riverdale R-7 School where Kaye and the Deputy Principal disagreed with the selection of 5 of the 6 students 'identified' as non resilient by teachers. It wasn't until some time later that they realised that one was locating the concept in a very narrow context - the school - while the other was looking more broadly at the capacities of the students to 'cope' (ie, survive) in unstable and sometimes dysfunctional families.

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