

## WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?

### CHILDREN and TEACHERS TALK ABOUT RESILIENT OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN 'AT RISK'

by

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#### Introduction

Considerable research has been conducted into childhood *resilience* - the capacity some children have to adapt successfully despite exposure to severe stressors (see Howard, Dryden and Johnson 1999 for a review). Recent Australian research (Howard and Johnson 1999) confirms earlier findings from other countries that a significant number of children from high risk situations demonstrate a remarkable capacity for resilience in the face of apparently overwhelming odds.

A strong feature of the published research on resilience has been the identification of both internal assets of the individual and external strengths occurring within the individual's social context; both are frequently referred to in the literature as internal/external *protective factors* (e.g. Garmezy 1985, 1994; Rutter 1987; Gore and Eckenrode 1994) or *protective mechanisms* (Rutter 1987). Just as risks have been identified as cumulative, protective factors seem to have the same cumulative effect in individuals' lives. The more protective factors that are present in children's lives, the more likely they are to display resilience.

The literature on resilience, however, is often short on detail about how protective mechanisms actually operate in the daily lives of real children. In order to better understand these processes, we conducted a qualitative study of teachers' and children's views on 'what makes the difference' for children with difficult lives who display resilient behaviours.

In this paper, we locate our research within the broader field of enquiry about resilience, then present a detailed and vivid account of our participants' views on what protective factors seem to be important in promoting resilience. We discuss our understanding of these views by drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and conclude by highlighting a key difference between teachers' and children's views on the importance of school achievement, competence and success in promoting resilience.

#### Review of the Literature

The historical bases for the concept of invulnerability from harmful influences, or resilience, were established by a body of work published in the early 1970s (Garmezy 1971, Garmezy and Neuchterlien 1972, Garmezy, Masten, Nordstrom and Terrorese 1979, and Anthony 1974) and investigations of specific populations of resilient children and adolescents followed (Garmezy 1974; Anthony 1987; Werner and Smith 1988; Garmezy and Rutter 1983). In these later studies the subjects were children and adolescents who were classified as being at risk of psychiatric disorders, delinquency and other negative life outcomes because of a variety of individual, family and environmental factors (e.g. neonatal stress,

poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, alcoholism and criminal activities). Rather than focusing on those children and adolescents who were casualties of these negative factors, however, the studies focused instead on those who had not succumbed. The questions this work asked were: What is it about these children and adolescents that enables them to survive? What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others? Instead of focusing on individual deficit, the new approach focused on individual strengths and, thus, the concept of resilience emerged in the psychological literature.

In the literature the identifying characteristics of resilient children are such things as social competence, problem solving skills, mastery, autonomy and a sense of purpose and a future (see Waters and Sroufe 1983; Garmezy 1985; Rutter 1980, 1984, 1985; Werner and Smith 1988; Masten, Best and Garmezy 1990; Gore and Eckenrode 1994; Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence 1994).

Protective factors have been described in relation to three primary systems in the child's world - family, school and community. In relation to the family, many of the protective factors identified by research clearly relate to the consistency and quality of care and support the individual experiences during infancy, childhood and adolescence. The work of Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) in Britain shows that another source of protective factors can be the school. Children in discordant and disadvantaged homes are more likely to demonstrate resilient characteristics if they attend schools that have good academic records and attentive, caring teachers. Studies conducted in the U.S. have also shown the important role that individual teachers can play in resilient children's lives (Geary 1988; Werner and Smith 1988; Coburn and Nelson 1989). In relation to the community, children in disadvantaged areas are generally considered more at risk than those in more affluent areas. However, certain community characteristics seem to operate as protective factors. The strength of social support networks provided by kin and social service agencies, for example, is one such factor (Pence 1988).

Many researchers argue that caring and support across all three systems outlined above are the most critical variables throughout childhood and adolescence (West and Farrington 1973; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston 1979; Rutter 1984; Garmezy 1985; Anthony 1987; Masten, Best and Garmezy 1990; Rhodes and Brown 1991; Gore and Eckenrode 1994).

Caring and support in the family, school and community not only establish the basis for trusting relationships throughout life (Erikson 1963), interactions that occur in these three environmental settings also fall into what Bronfenbrenner (1979), in his ecological theory of human development, calls the microsystem – the first of a series of nested social structures that have a powerful impact on children's development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory has the potential to illuminate why some children do and others do not display resilient behaviours in the face of adverse life circumstances. Changes in, what he terms, exosystem and macrosystem elements such as changes in philosophical/economic orientation (e.g. in Australia, the shift from liberalism to economic rationalism); unemployment; poverty; changes in government policies regarding housing, working conditions, health, law and order, all have reciprocal and bi-directional influences on all the other ecological systems. In other words, when elements in one system change elements in other systems react and interact. Children, located at the centre of these nested systems, are continuously affected, one way or another, by changes that occur in the environments that surround them (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

In each child's case, different patterns of action, interaction and reaction will pertain, even when stressors such as parental unemployment are the same. Thus, ecological systems

theory offers real ground for explaining why some children are put 'at risk', why some are not. Moreover, it deflects blame for their circumstances away from individual children and families because the theory indicates the sources of 'risk' are frequently located in the wider social environment (Garbarino and Abramowitz 1992).

## The Study

The data to be discussed here were gathered during the first phase of a three year research project exploring the concept of resilience in relation to children's lives. The work was carried out in five primary schools in an economically depressed urban area in South Australia.

Changes in macrosystem and exosystem elements, of the kind mentioned above, have had a strong effect on the geographical and social area in which the research was conducted. The systematic closure of secondary industry in South Australia; failure of small businesses and resulting unemployment of skilled and semi-skilled workers; the rapid introduction of highly accessible gambling machines and reduced social services have all had a particularly negative effect on the people living in the area in question. The principal of one of the schools participating in the study, for example, estimates that there are no working adults in 70% of families in the school; the percentage of children on School Card (a means-tested form of government assistance for educational expenses) in the 5 schools in the study is approximately 50%.

Children at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's systems are put 'at risk' by an accumulation of negative influences (Rutter 1987; Sameroff et al 1987). The lives of children that some of the teachers participating in the study described were not only subject to the general adverse conditions to be found in the local community but were additionally burdened by trauma and tragedy:

I had a boy couple of years ago, his father committed suicide - he was in and out of jail all year and then he [the father] finally committed suicide. (Female teacher 45 - 49 years)

Her father tried to commit suicide, and her mother, her brother and her had to help cut him down from the pergola. He tried to hang himself. This child is slightly dyslexic. (Female teacher 25 - 29 year)

One child's mother is a heroin addict and he has to stay home sometimes because the mother is spaced out. The child also has to look after the younger brother when Mum has gone off for the day. This child wants to learn, wants to come to school. When he does he is so tired from looking after the youngest brother and the mother that his concentration by the afternoon has gone - he is just about asleep in the classroom. (Female teacher 40 - 44 years)

During the initial phase of the project we talked to 125 randomly selected 9 – 12 year old children (in groups of up to four or five children) and 25 teachers (individually) about (a) what they thought a 'tough life' was, (b) why 'some kids have a tough life and don't do O.K.' and (c) why 'some kids have a tough life but do O.K.' . The diagram below was used to focus the discussions.

'Doing OK'

A tough life

Not 'doing OK'

Figure A: Visual prompt used to engage participants in discussion

Having established how the two groups of respondents conceptualised 'a tough life', both in general terms and in terms of individual children they knew, we proceeded to ask why it was that despite difficult lives, full of risk factors, some children manage to live conventionally-defined successful lives - what was it that made the difference? In Fig. A. the triangle that marks the transition point between 'doing O.K.' and 'not doing O.K.' was deliberately left blank, but if prompting was necessary, the interviewer asked whether there was anything that the family, the school or the wider community might be doing to help make this difference.

The reasons for asking the question 'What makes the difference?' were three-fold. First, was the desire to see whether Australians conceptualised the protective factors and mechanisms associated with resilience in the same way that the literature indicates British and North American respondents have. Secondly, the protective factors mentioned in the literature are often short on detail and texture – in this study we wished to flesh out what these concepts mean; we wished to develop some insights into how they might operate in the lives of real children (see Howard and Johnson 1999). Thirdly, we wished to compare children's and adults' views about 'what makes the difference' because adults are the ones who devise and implement intervention strategies. Usually these strategies are based on adult understandings and assumptions and often do not take into account the perceptions and understandings of those for whom the intervention is designed – if these perspectives are found to differ significantly, then the success of the intervention is cast into doubt. This paper is principally concerned with this last aspect of the question.

All of the children's and the teachers' talk was audio-taped and subsequently transcribed for analysis using the data management software, NUD•IST (QSR 1997). One of the key tools offered by NUD•IST software is the ability to track down and gather up, in an exhaustive way, emerging themes and preoccupations in the talk of participants. The transcript excerpts used in this paper to illustrate the similarities and differences in the children's and teachers' talk are exemplars of much larger bodies of text identified in this way.

### **What makes the difference?**

While children and teachers tended to see the role of the family and the community in promoting resilient behaviour in fairly similar terms, the two groups emphasised different roles for the school. What follows is a detailed examination of how the two groups of respondents discussed the question of 'What makes the difference?' in terms of the headings, Family, School and Community

### **The Family**

Children and teachers both saw the family as having a very important role to play in promoting resilient behaviour among children experiencing 'a tough life'. Teachers often talked about the family's involvement in the development of resilience in fairly generalised terms – for example, they talked of the importance of 'supportive relationships', of

'encouraging independence' and of 'providing the basics' – but when probed many gave specific examples to illustrate these concepts.

The importance of 'supportive relationships' within the family was the biggest category of response from the teachers. Although relationships between parents and children were seen to be of principal importance here, relationships with brothers and sisters, grandparents and other relatives were seen as being important either as additional sources of support or as substitutes if supportive relationships with parents were not available. Where this general concept of support was discussed in more detail, it was often described in terms of 'love' and 'caring'. One teacher, for example, described the family of one of her students in these terms:

Within the home, this person is part of a family that is caring. I mean the family do actually care about each other. They don't actually show it very often, but there is a family group. (Female teacher 25 – 29 yrs)

Another talked about the family providing 'unconditional love':

[What's going to make the difference is] unconditional love from their family. They have to know that whatever happens, not that their family is going to approve it, but they know there is somewhere they can go who will say, "Look you have done the wrong thing, but we are going to move on from here." Not let them get so desperate that they don't know where to turn. (Female teacher 40 – 44 yrs)

Along with supportive relationships, the family's role in providing 'stability' and 'predictability' was considered a crucial factor in providing children with 'a sense of belonging' or of 'being valued':

[What's going to make the difference is] a family environment where the kid has some form of stability, even though things that have happened can maybe seem to wreck what is going on, but [...] that child has got some form of feeling wanted there or worthwhile there. (Male teacher 40 – 44 years)

An important category of response among the teachers referred to family practices (or lack of them) that had the effect of encouraging 'independence' and 'maturity'. Both of these qualities were seen as characteristic of children exhibiting resilient behaviour. Sometimes encouragement of independence was seen as a deliberate and positive family strategy: '... knowing when to say you're able to have a go at this by yourself now' (Female teacher 50 - 54 years). On the other hand, some teachers cited examples where hardship had helped develop self-sufficiency and independence in family members who then provided strong role models for the children. Other responses saw the development of independence and maturity in individual children as a learnt response to adverse or difficult circumstances:

...it can be the situation of a family that has lost somebody or is a single-parent family and the child is resilient because of the way they have to cope at home, they learn to cope at home, they learn to handle situations. [Children] are asked to do things that they wouldn't normally be asked to do at their age and then you get many kids whose responsibilities, at say 9 or 10 years of age, [include] getting the younger brother and sister up in the morning, making breakfast, doing the lunches, taking the kids off to school and all this sort of gear - doing washing, making beds. It's amazing what

some of them actually have to do because, you know, Mum is maybe working nights or something like that. Those are all things that have to mature that child much quicker. (Male teacher 40 – 44 years)

The children's talk about the role of the family in 'making the difference' also focused strongly on 'supportive relationships' although this was not the term they used. In one respect, children and teachers conceptualised these relationships in very similar ways with the children also referring to the importance of love and support from members of the immediate family and extended family members too when necessary. 'Unconditional love' was described by Eleanor (12 years):

If they think they're not doing like up to their parents' standards, and if they tell their parents, their parents will say, "No, anything's my standard. You're doing fine and just if you keep trying you'll do better. You're living up to my standards. I don't have any standards for you. You're just a person".

Most often though, the children defined family support in very concrete terms – for them support consisted of parents (in particular) 'talking and listening to children' as well as 'giving attention' and 'encouragement' to them. The following exchange covers some of these criteria:

Int: What do you reckon makes the difference?

Jason (11 yrs): Parents.

Int: Parents?

Jason : Yeah. Um, "Look what I've done at school today."  
Some parents might take real interest and some others just might not.

Int: O.K.

Jason: Like they'll say "Oh! Well done!" or something and give you a hug or something. And other people go, "Oh who cares?" Or just push them out the way because they're talking to someone or something. They just go "Good job. Looks real good" (patting an imaginary child on the head while looking in another direction).

Int: So you're suggesting that this parent doesn't really mean what they're saying? They're busy doing something else?

Jason: My Mum used to do that when I played basketball.

David (9 years) sees support in terms of occasional exclusive attention from a parent:

[They should] take them out by themselves now and then. And do something that they've always wanted to do or something like that and they've never got it because they just haven't been right. So they take them out and do something with them, just two people. Like their dad and them and they just say, "Could we please do this today?" And he'll say, "Yeah. O.K."

Where the children's talk about family support is markedly different from the teachers' is in relation to a pervasive theme concerning the need for help with school work. Although neither the children nor the interviewer had defined a child experiencing a 'tough life' necessarily as one who was failing in school, a large number of children's groups raised this theme as an important factor in 'what makes the difference'. While it cannot be discounted that this response was an artefact of the research situation (the discussion groups occurred in schools), the recurrence of this theme throughout the discussions suggests that it was significant in its own right. The following excerpts are typical of this pervasive theme:

James (12 yrs): Help them do well in their school work. Like if they're not doing well to help them.

Int: What else can you think about that parents can do to help them?

Alan (12 yrs): Help them when they're in trouble.

[...]

Liam (11 yrs): Helping them with their homework.

Int: What about the family? How can the family make a difference?

Sharn (11 yrs): Put their foot down. Yes, if he's going out mucking around tell him to stay focused on school-work – or her. Just stay focused and they say "I'll always be proud of you and I'll always support you in your future life". They could give him some ideas of what he could do when he's stuck on something. Like mum and dad they say, "You could do this". Dad just gives me an idea, I can just go to it.

The data concerning family support is generally what one might expect, given the age and experience of the two groups of respondents. What is surprising is the appearance of what might be described as a competence issue among the children. None of the teachers talked about the family 'making a difference' by supporting children in their task of being competent learners at school – it could be that the teachers are suggesting that this is their exclusive province. The difference that families can make, in the teachers' eyes, is the provision of emotional support, the setting of a good example of persistence in the face of adversity and the fostering (deliberate or accidental) of the qualities of maturity and independence. The children concur in relation to emotional support but see both back-up help in the business of school achievement and understanding in the event of failure to meet certain pre-set standards, as an important element in the difference that families can make for children experiencing 'tough lives'.

## **The School**

When it came to the question of how the school can help make a difference for children who were experiencing 'tough lives', there were again similarities and differences between the teachers' and children's talk. Teachers barely mentioned formal learning at all, focusing instead on the importance of social skills training and making children feel comfortable and

secure within school. The provision of special Education Department-initiated programmes like those dealing with health issues or protective behaviours was also seen as an important school responsibility for children experiencing 'tough lives'. Children, on the other hand, talked less about the school's role in providing social support and much more about providing special help to overcome learning difficulties.

Typical of the teachers' insistence on the importance of social skills training and special programmes is the following:

[The school can help children learn] coping skills, I suppose - [what's needed is] a really, really good social skills program that looks at things like managing feelings, managing behaviour, coping with crisis, looking at what is a crisis and what is really a minor problem, so being able to determine the seriousness of things that are happening. Supportive learning programs too, like protective behaviour strategies, health programs that introduce kids to community agencies and their roles and supportive nature of agencies out there and bodies out there to assist that they might be able to tap into at an older age. But even something like Kids' Helpline they can tap into at any age  
(Female teacher 45 - 49 years)

The teacher's nurturing role in providing a caring, safe environment was discussed by many adult participants, some of whom also saw themselves as being a special person in the child's life:

It's the relationship with the teacher that's very, very important because often, I think with these kids, that's the only constant thing in their lives. The other things just aren't constant. (Female teacher 35 - 39 years)

The school has a huge role. I think that the teachers they come across, the support that they see that they receive and how safe and secure they feel I think can make a difference. (Female teacher 25 - 29 years)

Like the teachers, the children also saw the school as having an important role in providing social and emotional support for children with 'tough lives'. They mentioned, for example, the importance of home-school links - situations where communication between parents and school personnel is made possible and more friendly in formal settings. A meeting between parents and the school principal was often seen as one way of improving a child's situation. Other formal aspects of the school's programme were also seen as a good means for teachers and parents to get together to share information about children :

Int: What else could the school and teachers do?

Joe (11 yrs): Try and help the parents come in and have a talk, especially with parent-teacher interviews what we have once a year.

Paul (12 yrs): And Acquaintance Night.

Joe: And just talk about how the child's doing.

Informal contact was also thought to be useful with some children, like Tai (10 years), suggesting that a teacher could visit the child's home 'after school' and 'on the weekend and ask them how they've been going.'

The individual teacher's role in providing special support and comfort was mentioned less frequently by the students than by the teachers and often the children seemed to be referring to situations where bullying was causing a child to have a 'tough life'. Rita (10 years), for example suggests that teachers can be really understanding and help kids to have a better life at school by:

talk[ing] to the children that are like giving the person a hard time. Like get them all together and just say like they're not very happy about what the people are doing and stuff like that.

All participating schools had some access to trained counsellors and the special help that these people could offer those experiencing 'tough lives' was mentioned by children in each school. The special help consists of being able to 'talk about a problem' with 'special people that they could bring in from other places.' (Vince 12 yrs).

Important as these social/emotional supports were however, the single most important category of response among the children concerned the school's ability to provide special help in learning achievement. All discussion groups with children stressed the importance of programmes like the Learning Assistance Programme where mentors from outside the school come and work with individual children who are having difficulties, principally with reading. The children also stressed that schools should provide special tutors in a range of subject areas, individual attention to overcome learning problems and patient teacher assistance with learning tasks that prove difficult. Often talk about the need for special learning help for children with 'tough lives' overlapped or was linked with talk about special relationships and a caring school environment:

Int: What do you think the kid's school can give those kids to help them ?

Ky (13 yrs): Probably just like special help if they can get a special person that will turn out to be really nice and be their friend and like tutor them and stuff.

Int: Support them like that?

Mel (12 yrs): Yeah, and sort of like show them that they care and that they're not just being sarcastic when they're trying to help them.

Int: Not put them down but help them?

Ky : And if they're doing something wrong, like tell them how to do it right and not go off at them or something.

Bree (12 yrs): Yeah, take your time with them, don't get angry, don't get frustrated, just be normal and take it slow if they have to.

Inability to achieve or keep up in relation to school work was seen a major problem that helped to define children with 'tough lives' in all groups:

Sean (10 yrs) There is other teachers, like this thing they call LAP for kids to go to and they help them with their maths and stuff

[...]

Int: For this LAP programme, do the kids say what's so good about it?

Sean: Because they have fun and the teacher helps them with stuff.

Int: Do they learn?

Anne (10 yrs): Yes they do. A kid in our class goes to it and he has improved a lot.

Sean: Since he came into our class.

Int: Do they feel good in themselves do you think?

Anne: Yes because then they know they have achieved something.

Int: So that's pretty important is it?

Anne: To achieve something and not always do school work and not get anywhere

[...]

Int: So, it's important for a kid to feel successful do you think?

Anne: Yes, very important to feel successful and that because sometimes the parents can get really angry if they don't succeed in anything, that is what usually starts it all off so you start getting angry about school and then they just leave home, can't take it.

As we saw with the topic of the Family, we see again a strong concurrence between the teachers' and the students' talk about the importance of social and emotional support within the school for children with 'tough lives'. We also see, however, a clear divergence of emphasis in relation to school achievement. Not only do the children seem to define learning difficulties as a key criterion of 'a tough life', their talk about this topic is so pervasive and so tied up with their view of the school and its personnel as being caring and nurturant that it seems almost to amount to a form of school anxiety on the part of all respondents - falling behind and failing to achieve can predispose any child to 'a tough life'. It is interesting that none of the teachers talked about school achievement as a resilience-promoting factor despite the fact that learning is supposed to be the core-business of schools. Unlike the students, teachers perhaps may view failure to achieve as a *result* of children experiencing 'a tough life' rather than a possible *cause* of it.

## **The Community**

The role that the community can play in helping children who have 'tough lives' was a topic about which neither the teachers nor the children had a great deal to say. Many teachers excused themselves from commenting in detail because they didn't live in the area. Those who did comment referred to the importance of clubs that children could join - sporting, church-based, Scouts and Cubs and so on. According to one teacher, children who belonged to clubs:

... are perhaps more caring, more thoughtful, they have a softening effect on them. They seem to have quite a wide interest range and show a bit of enthusiasm for things around them. (Female teacher 50 - 54 years)

Access to community facilities like parks, playgrounds, recreational and community centres, public institutions like museums, zoos, science centres and so on, was considered important by a number of teachers. Children, on the other hand, talked about the importance of clubs (especially those that ran discos). The achievement issue was raised again by several groups - sport and dance clubs were good because children were 'encouraged' to do well and to improve their skills while other clubs deliberately set out to teach new skills:

Steve (11 yrs): With Scouts and First Aid and all that, they learn something

and I know with Scouts and all that, you do camps and it could teach you to do stuff that they might feel a bit better about themselves.

Sarah (10 yrs): They learn stuff and it gives them an enjoyment, to think that they are useful and they can do something that other people can't do.

Children also talked about the importance of local shopping centres as places where kids could meet and enjoy themselves looking at the shops, listening to music in record stores, hanging out with friends. Many groups mentioned the need for a 'friendly' community - one where people said 'hello' to you in the street and where adults acted in a kindly and protective way towards children:

Rita (11 yrs): Just say they got lost at the shopping centre, they like take them along to where they speak to one of the microphones and say their name out so their parent could find them and tell them where they are.

David (11 yrs): Like if the kid wants something, like a little car, that's \$3.95 or something and they've only got \$3.50 or something like that, you can just say, "It doesn't matter you can have this anyway." And they should be nice and stuff like that.

A number of groups discussed the way the community could assist in protecting children from bullying and harassment:

Gail (12 yrs): Probably if you're like getting bullied and there's other people around like, they would stop the people because they don't want people to get hurt.

Renee (11 yrs): Make sure the bullies don't bully them. Like have someone like an undercover policeman or something there, and make sure the kids aren't getting bullied.

More formal means of protecting children were also mentioned by a number of groups. Many children were well aware of the existence of Safety Houses and also discussed was a Kids' Help Line (a telephone crisis/counselling service targeted at children).

For teachers then, the community can help children with 'tough lives' by providing opportunities for healthy, constructive and/or educational activity outside the home. For the

children, on the other hand, the community is seen as having two major functions. First, it provides opportunities for engagement with others in enjoyable activities, many of which will develop useful skills and competencies. Second, the community is seen as a potential source of kindly adult support and protection for children in trouble.

## Discussion

Ecological systems theory '... has tremendous applied significance, since it suggests that interventions at any level of the environment can enhance development.' (Berk 1997: 26). While Bronfenbrenner himself (Bronfenbrenner 1989; Bronfenbrenner and Neville 1994) suggests that changes at the macrosystem level are especially important if there are to be far-reaching impacts on children's well-being, changes at the microsystem level will also have value.

In each of the microsystem elements that was discussed - home, school and community - the respondents could see many ways in which children could be helped. Frequently this help was seen, by both children and teachers, in terms of social/emotional support - love, caring relationships, someone to talk to and protection from harm. Children also raised the importance of links between microsystem elements in their promotion of home-school links. As Bronfenbrenner suggested, the stronger and richer the links between microsystem elements (what he termed the mesosystem) the better the situation for children at the centre of those systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The differences between children's and teachers' talk here is at the level of nuance or emphasis.

What is most interesting in the differences between the children's and the teachers' talk is a theme that the children exclusively articulated - the one concerning achievement, competence and success. While children definitely see that social/emotional support is important, they also see very clearly that success in school is very important in making the difference between 'doing O.K.' and 'not doing O.K.' The achievement theme was not mentioned exclusively in relation to school - an important role for parents was to help with school work; clubs could help develop new skills and competencies and so on.

Erikson (1963) drew attention to the importance of achievement and competence in middle childhood - the result, in his view, of a combination of children's enhanced cognitive, motor and physical skills and societal demands for increased competence. Traditionally the school, of course, has embodied these demands in its structured programme of instruction and skill development. This is an agenda that has very effectively communicated to primary school children that it is their task to learn, achieve, demonstrate competence and succeed in a range of areas. It is not surprising then, that the children in this study saw 'special help with learning' and special programmes, like the Learning Assistance Programme, as key factors that could help make the difference between a resilient or non-resilient outcome for children experiencing 'tough lives'. What's disturbing is that the teachers didn't.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that changing social conditions have made teaching much more difficult, complex and demanding work (Reid 1999; Ball 1993). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many teachers find their energies concentrated on maintaining order and discipline in classrooms at the expense of teaching. Others believe that some children's social and emotional needs are so great that the bulk of their effort must be directed towards this 'welfare work'. If a focus on achievement, competence and skill development has dropped in the list of some schools' priorities, it is all too understandable. However, the work of Rutter et al (1979) showed clearly that children 'at risk' are more likely to show resilient characteristics if they attend schools that have good academic records *as well as* attentive, caring teachers. The children in this study certainly support this view.

## Conclusion

Research into childhood resilience is compelling for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most powerful is that it purports to:

...promote hope rather than despair, empowerment rather than alienation, survival rather than victimisation and pro-action rather than reaction.

(Dryden, Johnson and Howard 1998: 30)

In this paper, we have sought to provide deeper and richer insights into children's and teachers' views of the factors that may influence resilience. While it may not be possible, in the short term, to make the big changes that will improve children's lives at *macrosystem* level, *microsystem* interventions are possible for those who come in daily contact with children. What is reassuring is that, as far as teachers and parents are concerned, neither major special efforts nor special skills are required to make a difference.

What the children in this study want of parents is attention; they want to be talked and listened to; they want to feel that even if they don't 'measure up' to some presumed standard of excellence they will still be loved and valued; they want to be encouraged and supported.

In relation to teachers, children want similar supportive relationships. More importantly, however, they want teachers to help them achieve and be successful in school. Without abandoning its role then in providing a 'safe haven' for children, the school must focus more carefully on teaching for mastery and competence in the whole range of subjects offered. It needs to re-focus on encouraging real-life problem-solving and providing opportunities for all children to achieve and experience authentic success.

As far as the wider community is concerned, it needs to provide more opportunities for involvement in activities and organizations that foster all kinds of skill-development and diverse kinds of interpersonal interaction. While the community should continue to provide protection from harm in formal ways (e.g. Safe Houses), individual members of the community also need to adopt a 'friendlier', more protective attitude towards children wherever they are encountered, acknowledging perhaps the wisdom of the old African saying, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'.

As Bronfenbrenner (1979) (and the poet John Donne) pointed out, no man (or child) is an island: we live in and are affected by nested social systems that interact and influence each other in complex ways. Clearly things that happen in the family, the school and the community - all *microsystem* environments in which the child is physically located - can have a major impact on the development of resilience. It is important to realise that 'what makes the difference' for the young participants in this study are behaviours and attitudes well within the capacity of most members and groups that constitute society.

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