

## Teachers' (mis)understandings of resilience

**Deborah Green**

University of South Australia [deborah.green@unisa.edu.au](mailto:deborah.green@unisa.edu.au)

**Murray Oswald**

University of South Australia

**Barbara Spears**

University of South Australia

*This study aimed to extend previous studies into resilience, by identifying the roles that teachers played in fostering resilience (N=57: females n=43; and males n=14). A quantitative scale was administered to teachers in South Australia's Catholic education sector to determine the extent to which they were involved in fostering resilience. A qualitative questionnaire followed which determined teachers' understanding of this phenomenon. The latter results suggested that teachers may be able to describe readily those circumstances which place any child 'at risk' (e.g. poverty) but they failed to recognise that those children identified as resilient also experienced circumstances in which they are potentially 'at risk'. Instead, teachers appeared to be describing some children as 'resilient' on the basis of displaying competence in coping generally but not because of experiencing 'at risk' life circumstances. This paper argues that teachers may be confusing the profile of a competent student: one who does not have 'at-risk' circumstances, with that of a resilient one, who also manages competently despite the 'at risk' circumstances in their lives. Recognising these differences is considered essential for teachers to be able to identify those children requiring intervention and support both at the personal, interpersonal, social and emotional levels.*

Resilience, non-resilience, 'at risk', teachers' attitudes

### INTRODUCTION

Research into 'resilience' has emerged from studies of children 'at risk', a term used by researchers to describe children who have experienced adverse or stressful life experiences (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Masten, 1997). Such experiences include: living in poverty, being part of a chaotic or dysfunctional family, being disabled or low IQ, being yelled at or abused, being emotionally neglected or abused, being sexually or physically abused, looking after siblings (although studies have suggested this could be a protective factor), experiencing long-term absence of a caregiver, witnessing extreme violence, separation, divorce, death of a loved one and frequent family moves (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983). Masten (1997) argued that children are considered to be 'at risk' if more than one of these risk factors are present in their lives. By virtue of their nature these adversities are often seen in multiple forms as opposed to unitary factors.

As previously highlighted, studies exploring children considered to be 'at risk' predated and consequently led to the adoption of the terms 'resilience' and 'non-resilience'. This latter concept enabled researchers to understand individual differences particularly in terms of how people respond to stress and adversity (Rutter, 1990). Consequently, researchers considered factors which enabled children to cope with stresses and adversities in their lives. Such protective mechanisms were categorised into: internal (characteristics, traits) or external (school, family, community), that reduce or mitigate the impact of, or exposure to, negative life experiences. Upon

considering protective mechanisms in these categories it is fair to say that research into resilience is strongly underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. This theory views the child as developing within a complex system of relationships that are affected by multiple levels of the environment. The child, as the central being of this nested system, is consequently affected by their environment and its actions. Thus, Bronfenbrenner's system consists of the 'microsystem' which encompasses the child and their immediate environment, namely the family; the surrounding 'mesosystem' which refers to the interactions among the components of the microsystem; the 'exosystem' which includes factors in the wider community; and the outer 'macrosystem' which consists of values, laws and customs.

Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ousten and Smith (1979) found that children said to be 'at risk' were more likely to be resilient if they attended a school with attentive, caring teachers. Researchers have shown that influences such as teachers' actions and expectations, school-wide policies, classroom and school climate play a key role in enhancing resilience and motivating positive attitudes towards school (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1997). Thus, teachers, merely by the amount of time spent with children, including children 'at risk', have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with them. These relationships can provide the 'at risk' child with a warm supportive adult figure who can act as a protective buffer against adverse circumstances. Therefore, this current study focused on one particular aspect of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems theory that is the 'mesosystem' and in particular the role of schools and teachers.

In a study investigating the roles of schools in relation to fostering resilience, Oswald, Johnson and Howard (2003) examined the beliefs and perceived roles of a group of teachers randomly selected from South Australia's government education sector. Using a survey of junior primary, primary and secondary teachers they found junior primary teachers placed a higher importance on the influence and role schools play in fostering resilience and less importance on the role of the family. In contrast, primary and secondary teachers identified the individual and families as being the most important aspect. Interestingly, collectively teachers undervalued their role and that of the school in providing protective factors for students considered to be 'at risk'. Dryden, Johnson, Howard and McGuire (1998) also found that teachers lacked efficacy when fostering resilience as compared to the perceived role of the family and community. These findings highlight the importance of recognising and enhancing the interaction between all levels of the ecological system. It is therefore important to note that these complex interactions have far-reaching impacts on children's development and well-being (Berk, 1997).

A number of studies have explored the possible relationship between religious affiliation and resilience (Antonovsky, 1979; Anthony, 1987a, 1987b; Blum, 1972; Cook, 2000; Lewis & Looney, 1983; Moskovitz, 1983; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Regnerus & Elder, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1982). Such studies have found that resilient children tend to have a long-term relationship with a competent adult, possess a religious faith and hold perceptions of themselves as worthy and competent individuals. It has been argued that religious beliefs can act as a protective mechanism by providing an individual with a sense of coherence and rootedness (Antonovsky, 1979); an optimistic outlook (Segal, 1986); and empathy and compassion (Moskovitz, 1983). These findings leave open the question of whether the ethos of a religious school (that included many of the schools in this study) would further foster resilience in 'at risk' students; an issue requiring further research.

With particular interest to this current study, a longitudinal study, known as 'Project Competence', conducted by Masten, Best & Gamezy (1990) explored factors attributing to the successful or unsuccessful development of Minnesota children considered to be 'at risk'. In this study three groups of children were compared: competent children growing up with little adversity; resilient children growing up with high levels of adversity; and maladaptive children who had not overcome their adversities. Findings indicated that the resilient children and competent children had a history of more resources and support which helped them cope with

adverse situations. In contrast, maladaptive children lacked resources, such as individual characteristics and family support, which if present serve to act as protection for human development. This study is important as it raised the concept of a 'competent' child as a further dimension of 'adaptive development'. Although both of these terms refer to the positive development of an individual, resilience is a more complex multi-layered phenomenon. For instance, Masten (1997) argued that resilience includes a significant threat to the individual or exposure to severe adversity and also the quality of adaptation skills. Thus one significant difference between resilience and competence is that of adverse circumstances or significant risks. A further important difference is that while competence involves personal attributes, resilience requires the interaction between personal and favourable environmental factors.

While the concept of resilience has been extensively researched, it appears to be constantly evolving. This current research contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting the perceived roles and beliefs of teachers in South Australia's Independent education sector.

## METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study was to investigate teachers' understandings of resiliency and of the factors which contribute to students being '*at risk*'. Teachers were drawn from the Independent education sector of metropolitan Adelaide, in South Australia.

A mixed method approach was used to enable a holistic picture to be gained of resiliency and the roles teachers play in fostering it. This "triangulation of method" (Neuman, 2000) enabled the phenomenon of resilience to be explored through quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data were used to supplement and illuminate the data collected in the quantitative phase of the study.

### Quantitative Phase

The sample was drawn from five primary school sites, each operating independently of one another. The quantitative phase of this study comprised of 57 participants: two principals; 46 teachers; and nine specialist teachers or teaching support staff. Following the approval of the Principal, an introductory letter together with an information sheet and a copy of the questionnaire were sent to all teachers in the selected schools.

The quantitative questionnaire was used to identify teachers' current roles with regard to interacting with students as a means of helping them cope with difficulties in their lives. A number of situations which described protective mechanisms for children '*at risk*' were posed for teachers to indicate their responses using a Likert scale. The Likert scale indicated a range from one to five; where one indicated '*never*' and five indicated '*about once per week*'. This questionnaire was modified and adapted from the questionnaire '*What teachers do to foster resilience*' (Oswald et al, 2003).

The sample for this phase of the study included 57 teachers from five separate Independent schools: 14 (25%) males and 43 (75%) females. Sixteen (28%) teachers taught junior primary, 24 (42%) teachers taught middle and upper primary years and 17 (30%) teachers were either specialist teachers or teaching support staff. The "What do you do to foster resilience" Scale listed a number of protective mechanisms and was used to identify coping strategies that teachers used to encourage students in times of adversity (see Table 1). Teachers were asked to indicate how frequently they encouraged students to use these strategies as a means of coping.

All quantitative data collected from this initial phase of the study were analysed using the SPSS for Windows, Version 12.

**Table 1. 'What do you do to foster resilience' Scale**

---

#### Coping Strategies

---

- I offer opportunities for students to share their problems and gain appropriate social support.
-

- I assist students in developing problem-solving strategies.
- I encourage my students to work hard and achieve.
- I point out the value of having good, close friends.
- I offer opportunities and guidance to my students about ways to cope with criticism from their peers.
- I offer my students opportunities and strategies to be actively involved in social actions.
- I offer opportunities and guidance to my students about ways to reduce stress and tension in their lives.
- I offer guidance, information and practice in the use of different coping skills.
- I discourage my students from blocking out problems by ignoring them.
- I discourage my students from blaming themselves all the time when things go wrong.
- I offer opportunities for students to discuss issues of concern and positively encourage those who tend to keep to themselves.
- I encourage my students to pray and seek spiritual guidance when things go wrong.
- I teach my students to look on the bright side of things and be positive and optimistic.
- I actively encourage students to investigate and use the various professional help organisations and personnel available to them.
- I stress the importance of relaxing diversions such as reading, listening to music and watching T.V.
- I emphasise the importance of playing sport and keeping fit.
- I emphasise the importance of being involved in the school community.
- I emphasise the importance of individual differences.
- I emphasise the importance of religious affiliation.
- I offer opportunities for students to discuss moral and ethical dilemmas.

---

Adapted from Oswald, Johnson and Howard (2003)

### Qualitative Phase

Further to this, a qualitative study was implemented with a sample of 14 teachers; ten females and four males. Data were collected by using an open-ended questionnaire comprising six questions.

- (1) What characteristics do children considered to be 'at risk' display?
- (2) What do you understand 'resilience' to mean?
- (3) How do you identify resilient children?
- (4) How do you identify non-resilient children?
- (5) In your experience, is it possible to foster resilience in the classroom? If so, how can this be achieved? If not, why?
- (6) Please comment on your understanding of the stability of resilience over time.

These questions were designed to elicit information from teachers regarding their understanding of children considered to be 'at risk', as well as differentiating between those perceived to be 'resilient' and 'non-resilient'.

Individual responses were collated and entered into a Microsoft Word document. Responses were summarised, separated into common themes with teachers' responses categorised and reported (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Specific comments were identified as relevant for enabling individual voices to be heard, thus adding to the richness of the analysis while enhancing understanding.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Phase

Results showed that teachers placed more importance on '*working hard and achieving*' ( $\bar{X} = 4.9$ ) than any of the other protective mechanisms listed. On the other hand, '*encouraging children to*

*investigate and use various professional help organisations'* ( $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ) was considered to be the least important strategy in helping students cope with difficult times in their lives. Repeated measures ANOVAs were applied to examine whether there was a significant variance between the mean gender scores and dependent variables. This illustrated that only two variables showed a significant statistical difference between mean gender scores. These variables included the extent that male participants encouraged students to be involved in sport ( $F = 3.2$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and social actions ( $F = 3.9$ ,  $p < 0.08$ ) as coping strategies. In both instances trends suggested that male participants placed more emphasis on the importance of sport and social activities as a means of coping than female participants. Using a similar questionnaire Oswald et al. (2003) found that both male and female participants yielded the same mean scores on the sub-scale of sport ( $\bar{X} = 3.9$ ) thus indicating they both used this strategy frequently. However, female participants in their study recorded a higher mean score than males in the sub-scale of social activities (females  $\bar{X} = 3.9$ ; males  $\bar{X} = 3.5$ ).

### Qualitative Phase

The sample for the qualitative phase included 14 teachers from three separate Independent schools: four (29%) were male and ten (71%) were female. Specialist teachers and teaching support staff did not respond to this survey but those involved in the quantitative phase did make additional responses which formed part of the qualitative discussion.

#### *What characteristics do children considered to be 'at risk' display?*

This question was used to identify teachers' understanding of the term 'at risk' together with characteristics they used to identify these children. Responses were summarised and categorised into common themes and presented in Table 2, from which two main categories were evident; emotional characteristics and relationship styles.

**Table 2. Common themes: Characteristics of children considered to be 'at risk'**

Theme	Frequency of responses	% of Total
<b>Emotional</b>		
Disruptive or aggressive behaviour	9	28
Unhappy, sensitive or anxious	6	19
Withdrawn	6	19
<b>Relationship</b>		
Inability to share or unwilling to participate	4	13
Lacking friends	3	9
Over-reliance on parents or lacking responsibility	2	6
Absenteeism from school	2	6
<b>Total</b>	32	100

#### *What do you understand resilience to mean?*

Responses to this question illustrated teachers' understanding of the concept of 'resilience'. When responses were summarised and categorised into common themes 12 participants (86%) stated that resilience was concerned with coping, bouncing back or moving on despite perceived adversities.

#### *How do you identify resilient children?*

Teachers responded to this question by using key words to describe characteristics or attributes that helped them identify children they perceived to be resilient. Themes were coded according to their commonality and summarised in Table 3. It is noteworthy that all identified characteristics were positive.

**Table 3. Key words: Characteristics of resilient children**

Responses	Frequency	% of Total
Good communication skills and openness	8	26
Being independent, confident and high self-esteem	5	16
Taking responsibility for actions and making sensible choices	5	16
Having a the ability to move on	5	16
Having positive attitude, being optimistic	4	14
Being strong willed	2	6
Having good social skills	2	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100</b>

### *How do you identify non-resilient children?*

This question elicited responses concerning characteristics displayed by children perceived to be 'non-resilient'. Response patterns fell into two main categories; 'interpersonal' and 'attitudinal' characteristics. These findings further suggest that teachers considered friendship problems, social issues, particular emotional traits and disruptive behaviour to be the major indicators of non-resilient children. The responses are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4. Key words: Characteristics of non-resilient children**

Responses	Frequency	% of Total
<b>Interpersonal</b>		
Friendship problems	12	34
Emotional characteristics	9	26
<b>Attitudinal</b>		
Disruptive behaviour	6	16
Low self-esteem	3	9
Lacking effort at school	3	9
Lacking responsibility	2	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>

### *Comment on your understanding of the stability of resilience over time.*

Eight of the 14 (71%) respondents gave information about resilience but did not comment on its stability as was asked in this question. Only three teachers answered both parts of the question and they believed that resilience could change and was thus unstable. Two of the respondents indicated that resilience was dependent on circumstances, experiences and the coping mechanisms of the child. Three teachers chose not to answer this question (21%).

## **DISCUSSION**

Previous research has identified the important role that schools play in helping students cope with adverse situations in their lives. For instance, Werner and Smith (1988) articulated the important roles that teachers play in students' lives by arguing that, notwithstanding the family unit, teachers provided positive role models in the lives of resilient children. It was thus important to determine teachers' understandings of the multi-layered phenomenon of 'resilience'.

### **Quantitative Phase**

Dryden et al (1998) in their interview survey of teachers' understanding of resilience found that teachers identified particular aspects of school life as playing a significant role, such as academic success and good student conduct. This was also illustrated in this current study where findings from the quantitative survey showed that teachers placed the greatest importance on encouraging students in 'working hard and achieving' ( $\bar{X} = 4.9$ ). Teachers indicated that they were emphasising this strategy to students on a 'frequent' basis; as often as once per fortnight or once

per week. Previously, Rutter (1987b, 1990) had identified that increased levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy through achievement acted as protective mechanisms that reduced or mitigated risk factors.

Many researchers have identified the internal attribution of success as a protective mechanism (Garmezy, 1974; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). They further argued that children who had an internal locus of control had a belief in their ability to affect change and thus considered adverse circumstances as changeable. That is, they believed they had the control to exercise change in their lives. Therefore, by encouraging students to work hard and achieve enabled them to exercise an internal locus of control.

In contrast, teachers placed the least amount of importance on '*encouraging children to investigate and use various professional help organisations*' ( $\bar{X} = 2.9$ ), thus indicating only occasional use of this strategy. However, it is important to note that 28 percent of the participants in this study taught children in the Junior Primary years, namely children aged 5 to 7 years of age, which may explain why this strategy was largely rejected.

In summary, teachers believed that the development of resilience was largely a product of individuals' endeavours and their willingness to work hard and achieve. However, teachers also recognised the importance of a warm, supportive classroom and school climate.

## Qualitative Phase

### *What characteristics do children considered to be 'at risk' display?*

Teachers were asked to respond to six open-ended questions to gain some understanding of their perspectives on 'resilience'. As previously mentioned in the introduction, researchers use the term 'at risk' to describe children who had experienced adverse circumstances in their lives (Masten, 1997). In order to explore further the concept of children considered to be 'at risk'; teachers were asked to describe characteristics that helped them identify such children.

The teachers indicated they had a clear understanding of the negative, observable characteristics that students considered to be 'at risk' often display. They described children who showed extremes in behaviour and were thus noticeable, especially when they were disruptive in class. All of the characteristics given were consequently negative, with no recognition that resilient children who were well behaved could also be considered to be 'at risk'. For instance 28 percent of the teachers surveyed described children considered to be 'at risk' as "disruptive, displaying aggressive behaviour" and generally being "off-task".

Cooleyquille, Turner and Beidel (1995) specifically explored the attributes of children considered to be 'at risk' and their interpersonal relationships. They argued that these children were often withdrawn or aggressive. Also, children who were vulnerable or 'at risk' because of their living circumstances, behaved in ways which often led to rejection by their peers. Teachers in this current study also identified a similar pattern of characteristics, with 19 per cent of participants stating that children considered to be 'at risk' were "withdrawn, unhappy, sensitive or anxious". Further characteristics identified included: "lacking friends"; an inability or "unwillingness to share or interact with others"; and an "over-reliance on parents".

It is noteworthy that children who choose to solve problems in various aggressive ways bring themselves to the attention of the teacher while also incurring sanctions from a school environment that discourages such behaviours. They are therefore easily identified as possibly being 'at risk' (Robertson, Harding & Morrison, 1998). However, teachers did not consider the possibility that students who were well-behaved may also be 'at risk', that is children who did not bring themselves to the attention of the classroom teacher.

In summary, research has identified a number of characteristics that helped to identify children considered to be 'at risk'. Broadly they included: depression; conduct problems; attention deficits;

social maladjustment; and academic difficulties (Attar, Guerra & Tolan, 1994; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). The responses given by teachers in this current study echoed these views suggesting they recognised characteristics displayed by children deemed to be 'at risk' and not coping. However, it is surprising that no participants in this study identified the possibility that a student could be 'at risk' and yet coping. That is, teachers in this study had not identified 'resilient' children, that is those coping in their school lives as also being 'at risk'. This is an issue of concern, in that, as several studies have highlighted children who are in need of help often convincingly masquerade as 'normal' or coping thus going undetected and consequently not helped (Myers, 1994; Rush, 1980).

### ***What do you understand 'resilience' to mean?***

The results of this study revealed teachers have some understanding of the definition of 'resilience' and yet they demonstrated a limited knowledge of the broader concept of resilience. For instance, teachers' definitions of 'resilience' were limited to: "an ability to cope with perceived adversity" or "dealing/coping with life and its complexities".

However, Benard (1995) argued that the term 'resilience' includes a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation (Benard, 1995). Recently Masten and Coatsworth (1998) argued that to identify resilience the following must be present:

- (a) a significant threat to the individual which is typically indexed by high-risk status. (for example, poverty.); or
- (b) exposure to severe adversity or trauma; and
- (c) quality of adaptation/development is good.

Teachers in this study failed to associate such stressful life situations and environments with resilient children while acknowledging their effective coping skills.

### ***How do you identify resilient children?***

Teachers responded to this question by using key words to describe characteristics or attributes that helped them identify children they perceived to be resilient. As illustrated in Table 3, 26 per cent of teachers characterised resilient children as being 'good communicators' thus being 'willing and prepared to discuss situations freely' and 'confidently' with adults or peers. Furthermore 16 per cent of teachers described students' ability to 'take responsibility' for their actions and be 'independent' with 'high self-esteem'. The lack of these characteristics also featured strongly in descriptions of 'at risk' and 'non-resilient' children. Werner and Smith's (1982) landmark studies offer support to this view by arguing that resilient children are usually responsible, motivated and self-confident. They also reported the absence of these characteristics in non-resilient children. Further supporting these current findings, teachers in Oswald et al's (2003) study identified the following as attributes and assets of resilient children: "being effective communicators, a strong attachment to at least one adult, holding a personal belief in being able to achieve and be successful" (p57).

The profile of a resilient child, as described by Benard (1993), Masten and Coatsworth (1998), closely resembled the attributes described by teachers in this current study. However, a number of key attributes were not identified by teachers. Those were:

- a) stable-relationships with peers
- b) well-developed problem-solving strategies
- c) high levels of self-efficacy
- d) success in at least one area of their lives.



Although teachers failed to use these attributes to describe resilient children they identified the lack of several of these to describe non-resilient children.

It is also important to note that the positive attributes teachers used to describe resilient children could be a result of observing such children's 'successes' or 'competencies'. The distinction between these concepts is critical because resilience includes the 'at risk' component whereas competence does not. It is possible that teachers in this study have identified the characteristics of a competent child instead of a resilient child. This may further explain why these teachers failed to identify resilient children in their descriptions of children considered to be 'at risk'.

### ***How do you identify non-resilient children?***

Teachers in this study were asked to describe characteristics or behaviours they used to identify non-resilient children. All responses illustrated negative observable behaviours or characteristics.

The most significant response patterns included social skills or friendship (34%). Teachers described non-resilient children as "withdrawn", displaying a "lack of social skills" such as "perspective taking, complaining about others and little eye contact". In terms of friendships teachers described these children as having "few friends, being socially withdrawn, wanting friends and yet behaviour repels them, often alone", and being the "last person chosen for a partner". Howard and Johnson (2000), as a result of their findings, argued that while non-resilient children sometimes take control of conflict situations, their solutions are often not constructive and consequently the conflict escalates. Collins (2002) further argued that non-resilient children experience an inability to cope, pessimism, peer exclusion and conflict. These findings were also supported by statements and comments made by teachers in this current study. Teachers used the following key terms to describe negative emotional states they perceived as characteristics of non-resilient children: 'anxious'; 'moody'; 'depressed'; 'hypersensitive'; 'unexplained mood swings'; 'over-reacting'; and sometimes displaying a 'bravado act'.

### ***Comment on your understanding of the stability of resilience overtime***

This question was only partly answered or not answered at all by participants. This could be the result of teachers' lack of understanding that resilient children could also be children 'at risk'. From previous questions asked in this phase of the study it would appear that teachers failed to recognise that, or were not aware that, resilient children may not remain resilient over time because of further changes in their circumstances. Furthermore it was not recognised that non-resilient children may become resilient over time as a result of development or the acquisition of protective factors.

One teacher inferred that resilience was a 'mindset', suggesting a personality trait which remained stable over time. That is, resilience would be assumed to be an attribute that one either did or did not possess and encompassed part of one's nature or make-up (Oswald et al., 2003). Supporting this view, Garvie (1998) in her study found that reports of anxiety and locus of control remained constant over time. The presence or absence of these constructs were often used to determine whether an individual was resilient or not. Due to their consistency over time Garvie (1998) argued that resilience must be a stable construct, a view expressed by teachers in this current study.

However, contrary to this view, Rutter (1990) argued that resilience could not be considered a fixed attribute, and that if circumstances changed or the risk altered then the status of resilience would change. This capacity to change also applied to non-resilient children should they develop one or more of the protective mechanisms. Masten et al (1990) also supported the view that resilience was a non-stable construct. In their study they showed that children were subject to different risk and protective factors at different ages and stages of development. Therefore a child might be non-resilient as an infant but due to changes in age and development might become resilient.

Adding clarity to this argument, Rutter (1990) identified what he termed as 'key turning points' in individuals' lives. He argued that a risk factor might be changed to a positive protective mechanism which enabled a greater likelihood of an adaptive outcome. Conversely, a previously adaptive trajectory could be turned into a negative one thus changing the possible resilience of the individual.

If resilience was not stable, as suggested, then attention needed to be paid to key turning points in children's lives (Rutter, 1990). Thus it is important that teachers and teaching support staff are aware of the instability of resilience in children considered to be 'at risk' consequently enabling them to help students cope with adversities as and when they arise.

### CONCLUSIONS

It is important to note that the teachers involved in this study demonstrated a strong desire to help students cope with adversities. However, the findings have revealed that teachers involved in this study have a limited understanding of the construct of 'resilience', despite their textbook style definitions. The qualitative questionnaire established and highlighted teachers' understanding of resilience together with characteristic profiles of non-resilient and resilient children. However, when teachers were asked to describe the characteristics of children considered to be 'at risk', the common themes included only negative attributes. Thus, there was no mention of risk factors in teachers' descriptions of resilient children. It is possible that teachers in this study have described so-called 'competent' children instead of those perceived as resilient. As previously cited in the introduction, confusion between these concepts is understandable as both share similar characteristics and attributes. There is however, one element that separates them, that is the presence of those adversities or risk factors in the lives of resilient children that are absent in the lives of competent children (Masten, Best & Gamezy, 1990; Masten, 1997). So what does this mean for schools? It is suggested that the distinction between these two constructs needs to be clearly articulated to enable teachers to identify each more accurately. Although this could take the form of professional development it is also suggested that the concept of 'resilience' forms part of teacher-education courses. This could lead to a heightened awareness thus aiding the identification of students who experience situational changes and therefore enabling teachers to act in a constructive, supportive way toward resilient and non-resilient children.

Furthermore, most researchers have identified resilience as being a fluid attribute, thus meaning that it alters as a result of developmental and situational changes. However, teachers did not recognise this attribute of resilience, instead believing it to be unchangeable over time. It is therefore further suggested that the issue of stability together with that of risk factors be addressed to enable teachers to comprehend fully the complexity of resilience and the roles they might play in assisting children considered to be 'at risk'.

### REFERENCES

- Anthony, E. J. (1987a) Risk, vulnerability and resilience: an overview. In E.J. Anthony & B. J. Cohler (eds) *The Invulnerable Child*, New York: The Guilford Press.
- Anthony, E. J. (1987b) Children at high risk for psychosis growing up successfully. In E.J. Anthony & B. J. Cohler (eds) *The Invulnerable Child*, New York: The Guilford Press.
- Antonovsky, A. (1979) *Health, stress and coping: New perspectives on mental and physical well-being*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Attar, B. K., Guerra, N.G. & Tolan, P.H. (1994) Neighbourhood disadvantage, stressful life events and adjustment in urban elementary school children. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 23, 391-400.
- Benard, B. (1991) *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: protective factors in the family, school and community*. Oregon Portland: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities.

- Benard, B. (1993) Resiliency requires changing hearts and minds, *Western Center News* 6(2), 27-29.
- Benard, B. (1995) Fostering Resilience in Children, *Eric Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education*, EDO-PS-95-9.
- Berk, L. (1997) *Child Development* (4<sup>th</sup> edn), Needham Heights Mass: Allyn and Bacon.
- Blum, R. (1972) *Horatio Alger's children: The role of the family in the origin and prevention of drug risk*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Collins, J.A. (2002) Attributes of non-resilient high school students: A qualitative study of suburban, middle class dropouts with previous academic success, *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Science*, 63(5-A), pp 1777.
- Cook, K.V. (2000) You have to have somebody watching over your back, and if that's God, then that's mighty big: The church's role in the resilience of inner-city youth, *Adolescence*, 35(140), pp 717-731.
- Cooleyquille, M.R., Turner, S. M., & Beidel, D. C. (1995) Emotional impact of children's exposure to community violence: A preliminary study, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34, pp 1362-1368.
- Dryden, J., Johnson, B., Howard, S. & McGuire, A. (1998) *Resiliency: A comparison of construct definitions arising from conversations with 9 year old – 12 year old children and their teachers*, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Fraenkel, J.R. & Wallen, N.E. (2003) *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*, (5<sup>th</sup> edn), Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Garmezy, N. (1974) The study of competence in children at risk for severe psychopathology. In E.J. Anthony and C. Koupernik (eds) *The Child in his Family: children at psychiatric risk*, *International Yearbook*, vol.3, New York: Wiley.
- Garmezy, N. & Rutter, M. (1983) *Stress, Coping and Development in children*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Garvie, P.A. (1998) The effects of difficult tasks on resilience in young adults, *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 58(10B) pp 5642.
- Gorman-Smith, D. & Tolan, P. (1998) The role of exposure to community violence and developmental problems among inner-city youth, *Development and Psychopathology*, 10(1), pp 101-116.
- Howard, S. & Johnson, B. (2000) What makes the difference? Children and teachers talk about resilient outcomes for children 'at risk', *Educational Studies*, 26(3), pp 321-337.
- Leedy, P. & Ormrod, J. (2001) *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn, Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Lewis, J.M. & Looney, J.G. (1983) *The long struggle: Well-functioning working-class black families*, New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Masten, A.S. (1997) Resilience in Children at-Risk, *Carei*, 5(1), p6.
- Masten, A.S., Best, K. & Garmezy, N. (1990) Resilience and development contributions from the study of children who overcome adversity, *Development and Psychopathology*, 2, pp 425-444.
- Masten, A.S., & Coatsworth, J.D. (1998) The development of competence in favourable and unfavourable environments: Lessons from research on successful children, *American Psychologist*, 53(2), pp 205-220.
- Minnard, C.V. (2001) A strong building: Foundation of protective factors in schools, *Children & Schools*, 24(4), 233-246.
- Moskovitz, S. (1983) *Love despite hate: Child survivors of the Holocaust and their adult lives*, New York: Schocken.

- Murphy, L.B. & Moriarty, A.E. (1976) *Vulnerability, coping and growth: From infancy to adolescent*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Myers, J.E.B. (1994) *The backlash: Child Protection Under Fire*, London: Sage Publication.
- Neuman, W.L. (2000) *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn), Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Oswald, M., Johnson, B. & Howard, S. (2003) Quantifying and evaluating resilience-promoting factors: Teachers' beliefs and perceived roles, *Research in Education*, 70, pp 50-64.
- Regneruis, M.D. & Elder, G.H. (2003) Religion and vulnerability among low-risk adolescents, *Social Science Research*, 32(4), pp 633-658.
- Robertson, L.M., Harding, M.S. & Morrison, G.M. (1998) A comparison of risk and resilience indicators among Latino/a students: Differences between students identified as at risk, learning disabled, speech impaired and not at-risk, *Education & Treatment of Children*, 21(3), pp 333-354.
- Rush, F. (1980) *The best kept secret*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rutter, M. (1984) Resilient children: Why some disadvantaged children overcome their environments and how we can help, *Psychology Today*, pp 57-65.
- Rutter, M. (1987b) Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, pp 316-331.
- Rutter, M. (1990) Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. In J. Rolf, A. Masten, D. Cicchetti, K. Neuchterlein, S. Weintraub (eds) *Risk and Protective Factors in Development of Psychopathology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ousten, J. & Smith, A. (1979) *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Segal, J. (1986) *Winning life's toughest battles: Roots of human resilience*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wang, M., Haertel, G.D. & Walberg, H.J. (1997) Fostering Educational Resilience in Inner-City Schools, *LSS Publication Series* (4).
- Werner, E. & Smith, R. (1982) *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: Adams, Bannister & Cox.
- Werner, E. & Smith, R. (1988) *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: Adams, Bannister & Cox.
- Werner, E. & Smith, R. (1991) *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. New York: Cornell University Press.