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Teacher–student relationships which promote resilience at school: a micro-level analysis of students' views

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This paper draws on qualitative data from an Australian longitudinal study begun in 1997 and completed in 2005. It identifies the ordinary, everyday, relational, 'little things' that teachers do to nurture and promote their students' resilience at school. It briefly uses Giddens' structuration theory to justify the study of micro-level relationships between teachers and students. It uses the voices of students to show how everyday life at school is the source of significant resilience promoting influences. In doing so, this paper demonstrates why local activities and relationships *matter* – because they have the potential to reinforce traditional school structures and processes, *or* to transform them to better support student resilience.

Keywords: resilience; student–teacher relationship; Giddens' structuration theory

Introduction

Promoting the health and wellbeing of our children is both a family responsibility and social priority. By focusing on the reduction of threats to children's health through mass vaccination campaigns, improvements in sanitation and food handling, and advances in primary health care, most children in industrialised countries enjoy better health than their counterparts several generations ago (Hatzistergos, 2007). Paradoxically, the identification and targeting of potential health risk factors has not led to similar improvements in many aspects of children's emotional and psychological wellbeing (Smith & Rutter, 1995). Newman (2002) reports that

> on the contrary, a substantial increase in psycho-social disorders of children has taken place in most developed countries over the past half century, including suicide and para-suicide, self injurious behaviour, conduct and eating disorders and depression. (Newman, 2002, p. 6)

Newman suggests that a more productive strategy would focus not so much on eliminating all threats to children's wellbeing but on developing their capacities to deal with and manage risk. He concludes that the promotion of childhood and adolescent 'resilience' is likely to be more effective as it places a greater emphasis on the 'protective processes' that promote wellbeing than on the identification and elimination of risk (pp. 6–7).

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What is childhood and adolescent 'resilience'?

Much has been written about 'resilience' since the dissemination of the findings of research into child and adolescent developmental competence by Garmezy and his team at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s (Masten & Powell, 2003). According to several key researchers of 'resilience', it is:

- 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426);
- 'the positive pole of the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity' (Rutter, 1990, p. 181);
- 'the inherent and nurtured capacity of individuals to deal with life stressors in ways that enable them to lead healthy and fulfilling lives' (Johnson & Howard, 1999, p. 3);
- 'a class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' (Masten, 2001, p. 228).

These definitions try to capture the essential features of the concept. Resilience refers to both a *process* and *outcome* of coping in response to risk, adversity, or threats to wellbeing. It involves the interplay between internal strengths of the individual *and* external supporting factors in the individual's social environment.

While these definitions demonstrate that there are a few ambiguities associated with the concept of resilience (see Kaplan, 1999, for a detailed discussion), there is strong support in the literature for the notion to be used as a helpful heuristic to conceptualise student wellbeing.

Among the lists of 'protective factors or processes' identified by studies of childhood and adolescent resilience is the importance of relationships in successful adaptation. In fact, Luther and Zelazo, in a review of the research on resilience presented in their 580 page edited book on the subject, state that

> ...resilience is a dynamic process involving shifting balances of protective and vulnerability forces in different risk contexts and at different developmental stages. At the same time, there are some fundamental components that extend across adversities and stages. The many decades of stellar empirical research encompassed in this book indicate that in large measure, *resilient adaptation rests on good relationships*. (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003, p. 544; original emphasis)

They go on to point out the importance of strong connections between children and adults who are 'most proximal' and 'most enduring' sources of love and nurturing. While primary caregivers are of critical importance in establishing relational bonds with children, 'relationships outside the family can also be highly beneficial' (p. 544). Teachers, in particular, are identified as 'enduring socialising influences' because they enter children's lives early, spend extended periods of time with them, and often remain close to them for years.

In an earlier qualitative study of teachers' and children's views on resilience (Dryden, Johnson, & Howard, 1998), one of the dominant themes to emerge was the importance of teacher–student relationships in promoting childhood resilience. Children, in particular, spoke of 'good' teachers who took an interest in them, listened to them, treated them with respect, and who 'explained things' when they were asked. We[1] were surprised by the simplicity of what the children said 'mattered'.

Because of this, we often referred to the study as 'The little things project' to emphasise how simple, everyday, relational interactions between students and teachers 'make a difference' to children's capacity to deal with difficult issues. Masten (2001) makes a similar point about the 'ordinariness of the phenomenon' of resilience.

> What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. (p. 235)

She suggests that this observation has 'profound implications for promoting competence and human capital in individuals and society' as it offers a 'far more optimistic outlook for action than the idea that rare and extraordinary processes are involved' (p. 235).

A related observation is made by Newman (2002) about the focus in some resilience studies on the spectacular, 'headline grabbing', acute catastrophes suffered by some children. He maintains that traumatic life events, such as the death of a parent, are generally less damaging to the wellbeing of children than being part of a violent and dysfunctional family on a day-to-day basis. Citing evidence from studies of adults' and children's views on the relative significance of adversities in life, Newman suggests that long-lasting but relatively minor 'daily hassles' like harassment and teasing have a more profound effect on children than acute events. He writes that

> [a]dults tend to identify acute and major life events as stressful, whereas children emphasise the importance of daily hassles, for example bullying, parental arguments, and problems with friends. . . . While acute life events may damage children, the available evidence suggests that relatively minor, but distressing and long-lasting adversities are more strongly associated with risk. (Newman, 2002, p. 17)

These new insights into the nature of risk and protective processes – namely, that both have their genesis in everyday life rather than in exceptional circumstances – have major implications for teachers and schools.

In *Positive alternatives to school exclusion*, Cooper, Drummond, Hart, Lovey and McLaughlin (2000) introduce the idea of 'personal experience' to elevate the routine 'lived experience' of schooling to a new level of significance. They maintain that 'personal experience' is

> bound up with the continuous acts of meaning making that teachers and students engage in throughout the school day. Day after day, and week after week, every member of the school community is actively processing numerous vivid and various experiences of institutional life, constructing meanings of enormous significance. It is these acts of meaning making that shape, for good or ill, the feelings, actions and interactions of staff and students alike . . . [who] are daily adding to their accumulated personal histories, to a history of feeling, thinking, doing, responding, deciding, accepting or refusing, despairing or surviving. (Cooper *et al.*, 2000, p. 185)

In a similar vein, Jordan (2006) describes the ways marginalised individuals and groups in schools are subjected to daily messages which reinforce their separation from more powerful groups who 'silence difference, limit authenticity and . . . define merit' (p. 82). Again it is the daily accumulation of 'destructive and disempowering messages regarding gender, race, and sexual orientation' that damages the wellbeing of children from minority groups (p. 80).

In summary, the promotion of resilience in children and adolescents is seen as a valuable and effective means of addressing increasingly chronic psychosocial problems in students in industrialised nations (Curriculum Corporation, 2002). Rather than focusing on the acute and dramatic risks to student wellbeing, some contemporary approaches to resilience promotion focus, instead, on the 'ordinary', everyday, 'lived experience' of students in schools to identify the sources of threats to their wellbeing, and the sources of support for student wellbeing. Resilience research consistently points to the importance of positive and supportive relationships between children and their teachers as a key protective factor in children's lives. Unpacking what teacher behaviours contribute to student resilience and those that undermine it is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

However, before proceeding with the analysis of micro-level influences on student resilience, I need to acknowledge the micro–macro, internal–external dualisms which continue to confound explanations of human resilience. In our previous studies of resilience we adopted an ecological framework to capture the diverse range of influential factors in children's lives. While Bronfenbrenner's (1981) bio-ecological theory helped us sort protective factors and processes into micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono systems, it was less helpful in theorising the recursive and dynamic interactions between factors within and between the different systems. For example, we were left to speculate about the relationship between micro-level factors like individual 'agency' or 'self-efficacy' and meso-level systems within schools which stifled student initiative, punished assertiveness, and silenced 'student voice'. The tension between deterministic analyses of trait related human resilience and 'heroic, beating-the-odds' analyses of 'survival' despite institutionalised repression was palpable (see Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999). To help reconcile these tensions I turned to Giddens' structuration theory.

Giddens' project has been to explain how everyday life is directly connected to larger social structures in a dynamic and recursive way (Giddens, 1984). His structuration theory

> integrates two previously separate streams of thought in the social science literature – theories that focussed on macrosocial structures and those that have examined human interactions at a microlevel.

> . . . the theory refers to the processes through which society and its structures shape the activity of individuals, although those structures, in turn, are constituted by the very actions they shape and condition. (Kondrat, 2002, pp. 436–437)

This means that the relationship between what happens at the local micro-level and the broader structural level is much closer than is usually thought. The implications of this closer relationship are quite profound. As Kondrat explains,

> Concepts such as 'human agency', 'freedom', 'power and empowerment', and 'social transformation' take on new and more expanded meaning. This expanded meaning adds a critical activist ingredient to . . . [the] concept of person in the social environment. (p. 437)

> . . . by connecting everyday life directly to larger social structures in a dynamic way, this theory has the potential to infuse a new, pragmatic, and more activist perspective on the micro–macro dualism in . . . theory and practice. (Kondrat, 2002, pp. 436–437)

Giddens' theory of structuration is complex, conceptually abstract, and macroscopic in focus (Hockersmith, 2005). It is deliberately and unapologetically short on micro-

level detail. Rather, it serves as an 'approach' to the study of social life which 'sensitises' researchers to the operation of significant social processes. It addresses an enduring tension between essentially structuralist and deterministic theories of human behaviour, and agency theories which emphasise the 'creative and disruptive abilities of individual actors' (Nicholls & Cho, 2006, p. 109). Giddens suggests that

> agents are neither powerless nor omnipotent to the social contexts in which they operate; rather, structure and agency exist in a complicated, endogenously determined, continuously evolving relationship with each other. (Nicholls & Cho, 2006, p. 110)

In short, Giddens' theory helps to explain why local activities and relationships *matter* because they have the potential to reinforce traditional structures and processes, *or* to transform them. Understanding this has practical significance for those who inhabit schools. Giddens' theory justifies the focus, within this paper, on the micro-level interactions with their teachers reported by students in a major longitudinal study of child and adolescent resilience in South Australia. Finally, it serves to put into perspective the overly deterministic views of some teachers who teach in 'difficult' schools (see Dryden *et al.*, 1998) by valuing the 'practical and discursive consciousness' of students who can identify those 'social system interactions' which promote their wellbeing (Boucaut, 2001, pp. 67–68).

The South Australian longitudinal resilience project

The data used in this paper were drawn from an eight year long research project which explored the concept of resilience in relation to selected South Australian children's lives. Briefly, this project used a 'person-focused' approach which

> [identifies] people who meet definitional criteria for resilience, whose lives and attributes are then studied ..., particularly in comparison to maladaptive individuals who have similar levels of risk or adversity but who display markedly different outcomes. (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 11)

In our earlier work in schools in Adelaide's disadvantaged northern suburbs, we talked to over 130 randomly selected 9–12-year-old children and their 25 teachers about (a) what they think a 'tough life' is, (b) why 'some kids have a tough life but do O.K.' and (c) why 'some kids have a tough life but don't do O.K.'[2] (see Dryden *et al.*, 1998).

Using information from this study, we constructed a screening device (see Appendix 1) to help teachers identify children displaying resilient or non-resilient behaviours at school. Teachers in our participating schools identified 55 9–12-year-old children who were experiencing 'tough lives', 30 of whom were 'not doing O.K.' and 25 of whom were, according to their teachers, 'doing O.K.'.

We then initiated a longitudinal study which tracked the children over several years to determine whether protective processes (i) actually featured in the lives of children who were 'doing O.K.'; (ii) if their absence was obvious in the lives of children who were 'not doing O.K.'; and (iii) how protective processes worked in practice. We wanted to identify the life stressors present in 'at risk' children's lives and learn what internal and external resources or 'assets' they drew upon to deal with them.

We interviewed as many of the children as we could track down each year for five years (1997–2001) and then again four years later (see Howard & Johnson, 2005).[3] The semi-structured interview schedule that we used contained the following questions and related resilience constructs.

Table 1.   Key interview questions and related resilience constructs

Questions	Resilience constructs
What important things have happened to you in your life?	• Impact of life events • Exposure to risks • Operation of protective processes
Who are the important people in your life at the moment?	• Love and connectivity • Sense of belonging • Family support
How do you like to spend your time?	• Engagement in activity • School and community resources
What do you like about your life?	• Self-esteem • Autonomy • Self-efficacy and agency
Are there things that have happened in your life that you wish hadn't happened?	• Explanatory style • Future orientation
What are you proud of in your life?	• Self-esteem
Have you some plans for the future?	• Future orientation
What may help or hinder you in achieving those plans?	• Autonomy • Self-efficacy and agency • Operation of protective processes
What advice would you give other kids about life?	• Self-efficacy and agency • Autonomy

The study produced a treasure chest of data about children's lives which I recently re-analysed to better understand – from the students' perspective – how everyday interactions with teachers helped them cope with adversities, and, alternatively, how they contributed to feelings of alienation and disaffection from school. I did this by retrieving all comments made by students about their teachers using the 'code-and-retrieve' capabilities of the qualitative data analysis software program, NUD.IST 6 (QSR, 2002).

The little things …

It almost begs commenting that the actions and dispositions identified here are singularly unsurprising and 'ordinary'. Yet it is their very ordinariness that makes them so important – and within the capacity of most classroom teachers to implement.

Being available

Over the years that we spoke to the students, many teachers were named each year by the same students when they were asked to identify 'the important people in your life'. Younger students frequently cited teachers they'd had for several years and who still showed an interest in them. Chris (pseudonyms are used for all students), for example, talked about revisiting his former teacher who was still teaching at his school:

The only problem now is that the teacher who taught me how to write stories – Miss L. – last year and the three years I had her, well she wants me to write stories still and take

them to her class. So what I am going to do is I'm going to surprise her and make comics to give her.

She is a really special person to me because even though I'm not in her class she invites me over sometimes to do plays. I was in the Green Mean Machine, one of her plays. I had to act three people. (Chris – male, aged 10; second interview; designated as 'resilient')

In his third interview, the same boy admitted missing his former teacher as they had lost contact when he moved to a different school in a rural area.

The most commonly cited teachers by secondary students were their 'pastoral care' teachers.[4] During a Year 4 interview with a 15-year-old girl, the interviewer commented that 'you've mentioned Miss T. for years – is she still your care teacher?' She replied:

Yeah, since Year 8. You are meant to have her from Year 8 to Year 12. She is a very loving person and she grows on you. She looks out for you and helps you and everything. (Bron – female, aged 15; fourth interview; designated as 'resilient')

A different student commented on the same teacher:

Yeah, Miss T., she's a good teacher. She's good to get along with in the mornings. Like if I'm feeling upset or something, as soon as I walk in the door and she says, 'Hello' – it just makes me happy. Just her being there. (Amber – female, aged 14; third interview; designated as 'resilient')

According to quite a few students, having teachers who know them well, who are interested in their lives, who value them as people, and meet with students regularly – 'just being there' – had a positive impact on their sense of wellbeing and coping capacities. In the cases cited above, structural arrangements – appointing 'pastoral care' teachers to secondary 'home group' classes for up to five years; committing primary teachers to three to four year appointments with the same class – worked well. By putting processes in place that promoted student access to helpful and approachable teachers for extended periods of time – years in fact – these schools invested in primary relationships as a way of promoting student wellbeing.

Interestingly, some students were critical of school arrangements that distanced them from their 'care' teachers. For example, several students specifically said that they would not seek the help of school counsellors 'because I don't know them'. In large and busy schools this isn't surprising. It also reinforces Luthar and Zelazo's (2003) point that the 'most proximal and most enduring' relationships seem to be the most nurturing.

Listening

Students valued teachers who actually listened to them! Their comments reflect a real need for open and honest discussion with teachers about issues that affect them. As this student comments, teachers are often judged on their ability to listen to students.

I know Miss S. is a nice teacher and everything. Me and Miss S. get along alright and she's a pretty good teacher. Maybe Miss T-S. my drama teacher and Miss P., she's a person who comes around to classes and checks up on us. I'd probably talk to them because usually they listen to me so they're probably the best three teachers that I could probably talk to in this school anyway.

Well I've known them since I've been at high school and I've usually been in their class every year and they're really nice people and they listen to most people when they've got problems and they help them out. (Shane – male, aged 14; third interview; designated as 'resilient')

Another student elaborated on some teachers' ability to listen empathetically.

A: Because the teachers know who you sit with and what happens so if you're having a fight with somebody you just bitch about the people with the teachers and like they'll listen but they won't tell anybody else, like they understand cause they've been there. They know what girls are like.
Q: So basically you use them as an ear?
A: Yeah.
Q: So you just tell them what's going on.
A: Yep.
Q: And how does that make you feel?
A: Just that they know you, that you can talk to them, I don't know. They're just there to listen to you. (Jess – female, aged 14; third interview; designated as 'resilient')

The opposite was also the case with teachers who 'don't listen' being roundly criticised by students. Several students took it very personally when their teacher didn't listen to them, as this comment shows:

My maths teacher, I hate her. She doesn't listen to you. She just doesn't listen to you. She makes a mistake and you try and tell her and she says that she's just doing it to catch you out. She's not like all the other teachers, she doesn't listen to anything you say. In fact, if you talk to her, you get in trouble. (Jodi – female, aged 15; third interview; designated as 'resilient')

'Listening', it would seem, is one of the most basic ways teachers convey their respect for their students as fellow human beings. To 'not listen' signals more than just being too busy to attend to students – it shows 'disrespect'.

Teaching the basics

We have written elsewhere about the link between mastering 'the basics' at school and students' perceptions of their wellbeing (Howard & Johnson, 2000). It seems that children view the '3Rs' as their core business at school and rely on teachers to actually teach them effectively. One boy, who was identified as displaying non-resilient behaviours at school, was quite critical of the teachers at his former school for not helping him master 'the basics'. This contrasted with the teachers at his current school who

help me with my work and they help me with my reading and with my maths. I want to get ahead. I want to get my reading up, my maths and my spelling, and my handwriting up. I've wanted to do that since I was in Year 4 but I couldn't because of the school. But I've improved since I've come here. We've got smaller classes and, like, the teachers listen and they help you more. (Dan – male, aged 12; second interview; designated as 'non-resilient')

Another boy acknowledged his teacher, suggesting that

If it wasn't for her I wouldn't be able to count right and if I got a job like counting, I wouldn't be able to count. It would be hard for me to do that job if I couldn't count. (Matt – male, aged 10; first interview; designated as 'resilient')

Tellingly, a girl, who had experienced chronic problems at school and at home during the five years she was involved in the study, proudly recounted her success in an internet poetry writing competition. It was an occasion to celebrate a rare academic success.

> I've told my English teacher and I've told my friends. The day I got the letter my eyes opened wide. I said, 'I'm taking this to school tomorrow!' and I was reading it to everyone. I was so proud of it. And I got another one a little while ago saying that out of the 33 poems chosen, mine was one of the ones that they want me to read on a CD. So it's called the Sounds of Poetry. I'm pretty proud of that. (Amy – female, aged 15; final interview; designated as 'non-resilient')

To her, demonstrating academic success was central to her self-esteem. As we have written elsewhere,

> it is important to consider the link between self esteem and school achievement. Since the 1960s, many studies have indicated that there is a *correlation* between self esteem and school achievement but there is very little undisputed evidence that high self esteem *causes* school achievement. In fact, there is more reason for thinking that the reverse is the case – self esteem is the *result* of success in school. (Dryden *et al.*, 1998, p. 25)

Finally, quite a few students recognised the value of extra tuition in the basics if their performance was lacking. They described getting 'special help' to improve their reading and writing and saw this provision as an essential responsibility of their teachers.

Being positive

Burdett's Australian studies of children's positive and negative self-talk found that teachers play a central role in either reinforcing negative cognitions or in interrupting them (see, for example, Burnett, 1996). This can positively influence students' level of engagement at school and their preparedness to attempt tasks or to retreat from them. One of the students in the study clearly articulated the importance of his teacher's encouragement and modelling of positive self-talk:

> My teacher is important because he's the one that urges me on to do stuff. He says 'come on Christopher, you can do it, just think positive', and if it wasn't for him I couldn't have done all of this that I have. (Chris – male, aged 11; third interview; designated as 'resilient')

Intervening

In our earlier study of teachers' and students' views on resilience (Dryden *et al.*, 1998) we found that children have quite firm beliefs about the relative power of teachers to 'do something' if a student's wellbeing was threatened. We concluded that

> [children's] conceptions of teachers are strongly action oriented, suggesting that children accord their teachers higher levels of efficacy than perhaps teachers do themselves. They also demonstrate that most children *expect* teachers to have high levels of agency to fulfil their roles as carers, instructors, managers, and peace keepers. While some teachers may have serious doubts that they 'make a difference' in children's lives, the children in this study unequivocally affirmed teachers' pivotal position of influence within the child's immediate environment. (Dryden *et al.*, 1998, p. 21)

This perception of teachers was repeated many times by students in the longitudinal study. For example, Danni recognised and appreciated the ability of her teacher to find 'social justice' money to help her fund her attendance at a school camp. She explains how her teacher helped her:

A: Miss A., she's really nice. She helps me with everything, she helps me with anything if I'm stuck with anything. Like, she helped me through camp. Yeah, she's awesome.
Q: Through camp?
A: Yeah.
Q: How did she help you through camp?
A: Well because my family is big – there's four kids and my mum and my dad. And sometimes my dad works and sometimes he doesn't. And I didn't have enough of everything and my mum didn't have enough money to pay because it's $67 for one child, something like that. So she got, she helped me get 'social justice' money and stuff like that, and I went to camp and I had a heaps good time. (Danni – female, aged 12; first interview; designated as 'resilient')

When teachers *didn't* act in the interests of their students when they should have, they were justifiably criticised by their students. This was especially so in cases of bullying and harassment. From the students' perspective, intervening to stop bullying was considered teachers' core business. Alex, for example, was constantly harassed at his high school because he was a 'lanky bastard' – very tall for his age. He describes a litany of inaction by some of his teachers:

Q: So have you been involved with counsellors here about how to react to harassment?
A: Yes, I have.
Q: Has that worked?
A: No. I actually find this non-harassing school doesn't do anything about harassment. I mean like, something would happen and then the following day, I would talk to them about it. So the teacher puts in an incident slip that someone was harassing me and he's witnessed it but then nothing gets done about it.
Q: Are you saying that they've got an anti-harassment policy but that they don't implement it?
A: Yeah.
Q: Have you told them that?
A: Yep.
Q: The counsellor?
A: I've told Miss S., Miss C. and Miss A. and Miss F.
Q: And what's their reaction to that?
A: They don't say anything. The principal, she doesn't do anything either. (Les – male, aged 16; final interview; designated as 'non-resilient')

From Les's perspective, his teachers let him down when he asked for their help. It is easy to detect his sense of disappointment with his teachers for failing to implement anti-harassment procedures they supposedly endorsed.

Other 'human' connectors

The students identified other aspects of their relationships with their teachers that may seem a little frivolous but are, nevertheless, important sources of pro-social bonding between teachers and students. For example, they mentioned teachers who liked to have fun and who enjoyed a joke. They identified teachers who remembered personal events and happenings like birthdays, the birth of siblings, key sporting achievements, and reaching milestones (e.g. getting a drivers' licence). They thought that teachers who could 'be themselves' were 'real', 'weird', and 'cute'. They named teachers who respected everyone as 'human beings' and not just as 'students'. They also described some teachers who were 'up themselves', 'arrogant', 'fight pickers' and/or 'power freaks'. These less endearing terms were used to describe those teachers who made life at school more difficult than it needed to be.

Summary and conclusion

From this micro-level analysis of 'at risk' students' views of their teachers, resilience promoting teachers often engage in the following practices:

- they make themselves available and accessible to students;
- they engage students by actively listening to their concerns and worries;
- they take responsibility for actively teaching their students the basic reading, writing and numeracy skills needed for independent learning, even if their students have struggled in the past to master these skills;
- they have empathy with, and understanding of, their students' 'tough' circumstances yet provide them with positive strategies to deal with adversity;
- they advocate for their students by mobilising existing support provisions that are available for 'at risk' students;
- they actively use their power as adults and professionals to identify and oppose bullying and harassment at school; and finally,
- they remember the 'human touches' that promote pro-social bonding between teachers and students.

These are not particularly remarkable or unusual practices. In fact, good teachers have been doing these, and other, positive things for generations. Perhaps what is most significant about them is that they represent the micro-level interactions that Giddens' structuration theory only alludes to. Their identification confirms that local and everyday interactions have a significant impact on students' wellbeing and, potentially, the school processes and structures which define the ground rules of everyday life at school. Ironically, many students seem to understand this better than some of their teachers. Continuing to explore the dynamic and recursive interaction between micro and macro influences in students' school lives remains an ongoing challenge of future research into child and adolescent resilience.

These insights also support Hargreaves' (1994) and Sachs's (2003) call for a 'rethinking [of] the macro and micro social and political dimensions of teacher professionalism ... [so that it can] move in a more activist direction' (Sachs, 2003, p. 137). Hargreaves, in particular, suggests that this will involve a redefinition of teacher–student relationships along the lines suggested in this paper. He contends that a 'new professionalism' will involve a

> movement away from the teacher's traditional authority and autonomy towards new forms of relationship with colleagues, with students, and with parents. These relationships are becoming closer as well as more intense and collaborative, involving more explicit negotiation of roles and responsibilities. (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 424)

At a time when the 'culture war' between traditionalists and progressives is being played out in education policy debates across Australia (Reid, 2007), there is increasing evidence that more structured, standardised, and authoritarian regimes in schools will not deliver the kinds of social outcomes expected of our schools. If the views of the students in this study are indicative of more general student concerns, then a reversion to more authoritarian and 'traditional' forms of schooling will be met with passive and, in some cases, assertive resistance. Shor and Freire (1987) warned some time ago that our schools face a crisis if teachers 'fall-back' to authoritarianism and a content-focused curriculum.

Clearly, it is important that teachers listen to their students, engage them as fellow human beings, recognise and understand their perspectives and world views, and to attend to their relational needs. This will require teachers to be more attuned to the complex mix of contextual and relational factors which promote student connectivity to school and their resilience in the face of adversity. As the students in this study testified, teachers are able to 'make a difference' to the lives of their students in quite profound and socially significant ways by actively focusing on 'the little things' within their sphere of influence. While the daily accumulation of 'destructive and disempowering messages regarding gender, race, and sexual orientation' damages the wellbeing of some children (Jordan, 2006, p. 80), the opposite seems to be true as well. Small and repeated actions to connect with and relate to students by teachers at the micro-level can disrupt seemingly hegemonic school processes that threaten the wellbeing of students. Getting this message of empowerment across to teachers who are weighed down and paralysed by populist notions of social and educational determinism remains a significant challenge.

Notes

1. I use the collective noun to acknowledge the contribution to the project made by my colleagues Dr John Dryden, who returned to the USA in 2000, and Dr Sue Howard, who died in May 2006.
2. In the original Project Competence conducted by Garmezy, 'doing okay' was the first criterion used to determine psychosocial competence (Garmezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984). We also decided to use the term in our studies as an easily understood, lay person's description of an individual's 'track record of effective performance in developmental tasks that are salient for people of a given age, society or context, and historical time' (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 5).
3. Our numbers of participants fell progressively from 55 in the first year of the project to 30 five years later due to the high mobility of their families. We managed to track down eight of our original participants for a final interview at the end of 2005 – eight years after we began the project.
4. Most secondary schools in South Australia have a designated time early in the school day to deal with administrative and 'pastoral care' matters. Many schools try to keep groups of students together for consecutive years with the same 'care' or 'home group' teacher.

Notes on contributor

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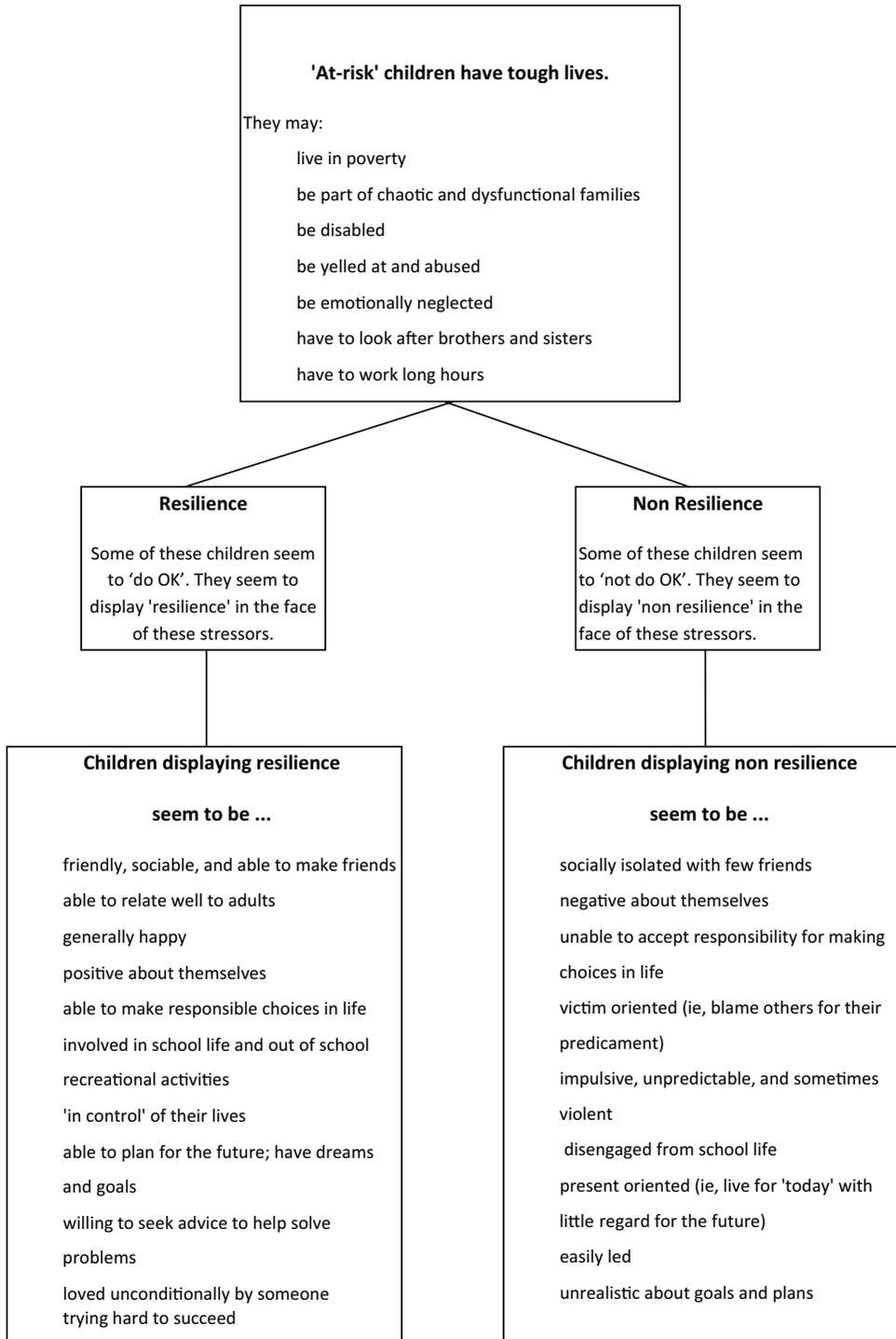
Appendix 1. Screening device used by teachers

'At-risk' children have tough lives.

They may:

    live in poverty

    be part of chaotic and dysfunctional families

    be disabled

    be yelled at and abused

    be emotionally neglected

    have to look after brothers and sisters

    have to work long hours

Resilience

Some of these children seem to 'do OK'. They seem to display 'resilience' in the face of these stressors.

Non Resilience

Some of these children seem to 'not do OK'. They seem to display 'non resilience' in the face of these stressors.

Children displaying resilience

seem 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 and out of school recreational activities

'in control' of their lives

able to plan for the future; have dreams and goals

willing to seek advice to help solve problems

loved unconditionally by someone trying hard to succeed

Children displaying non resilience

seem to be ...

socially isolated with few friends

negative about themselves

unable to accept responsibility for making choices in life

victim oriented (ie, blame others for their predicament)

impulsive, unpredictable, and sometimes violent

disengaged from school life

present oriented (ie, live for 'today' with little regard for the future)

easily led

unrealistic about goals and plans

Figure 1.   Identifying 'at risk' children who are either displaying 'resilience' or 'non-resilience'.