

# Building Resiliency in Students with Special Education Needs

## A journey of discovery

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes an action research project, based within a school, to develop and increase the social resiliency of students with special education needs in both school and community settings. The programme included role-plays, scenarios and problem solving. An assessment tool was developed to measure self-esteem amongst the students and this tool became a learning resource for the students. Resources were gathered from similar projects and the health and physical education (PE) curriculum. Outcomes included increases in students' resiliency and were reported by the students themselves, teachers, teacher aides and parents. Reflections from the researchers about students' outcomes and the action research process are included.

### Practice Paper

#### Keywords

Action research, adolescents, assessment tool, effective practices, life skills, resilience, self concept.

### INTRODUCTION

This project was initiated by the head of Learning Support, who encouraged the head of the Physical Disability Resource Centre to be a co-researcher. Mairehau High School is a co-educational, decile 5 school located in the north-east of Christchurch. It draws a wide range of students from a diverse community, and has a high proportion of students with special education needs, including a large number who are funded through the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS). A number of years ago a senior life skills class was established to meet the needs of ORRS students ready for transition. However, over time the numbers grew to include vulnerable at-risk students who were not ORRS funded. The school became involved in the Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project at the end of 2004. We suddenly found ourselves in the role of action researchers.

The project itself was slow to begin. We felt there was a lack of clarity and purpose. Real progress was not made until the beginning of Term 2, 2005.

#### Action Research: Reconnaissance Plan

At this stage the two Mairehau High School researchers began to work with the research team leader at the Christchurch College of Education (CCE), and we were rather alarmed because time seemed to be slipping away. Things were so unclear, we didn't really know our focus, we didn't know how to go about undertaking the research, and the end of year deadline was looming even closer.

However, the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other meant we very quickly began to focus in on the key needs of our students and one factor in particular kept coming to the fore. This need was highlighted by the naivety of some of the students, which were illustrated by the following examples:

- student S asked by a "friend" if he could borrow his brand new walkman for a couple of days and naively gave it up without being able to identify who the friend was, with the result it was never seen again
- student T reported their vulnerability around hopping into cars with drunken drivers and being "used" for their access to money through their disability allowance.

Students, families, educators and staff at Mairehau High School reported that the group of students of interest in the EePiSE project may have low resiliency, and that this had an adverse impact on their abilities or opportunities to participate, take risks, "bounce back" from set-backs, gain enjoyment and a sense of achievement, contribute to local networks, and have a realistic look at future options. This led the researchers to focus on the concept of trying to build resiliency in these students. We began our research by exploring resources at the CCE.

We discovered some very user-friendly publications, which were easily adapted to meet the needs of our students. We also worked closely with a secondary advisor for health and PE from teachers' support services who alerted us to the link with the health and PE curriculum. She was also able to provide us with a framework of lessons that she had developed for use with a Year 9 at-risk class. In addition the advisor provided us with professional readings and research articles and Ministry of Education curriculum documents that we were able to incorporate into the teaching programme.

We focused on resiliency because one of the researchers had previously completed some research in Australia focusing on minimising the harm caused by illicit drugs, and had found the emphasis was increasingly being placed on building student resiliency. In our opinion resiliency is the ability of people to handle bad experiences, set-backs and disappointments in life, to learn from these difficult experiences, but to still maintain self-confidence, self-esteem and feeling of self-worth.

Once the focus had been decided, this sparked a heated and excited discussion about the need to develop resiliency in the students with special education needs as they were seen as particularly vulnerable.

Both school-based researchers were able to note numerous stories where these students had been manipulated or were very vulnerable and where their resilience was battered. Many of them had bought into an “experience of misery” by the time they reached the senior levels of high school, where their lack of success had undermined their sense of self-worth and resilience. They were no longer prepared to try new things for fear of failure. We sought to address this concern. Both researchers had worked in this area for a long time in many guises and felt a programme of this nature was long overdue.

Working with experts from the CCE and having the opportunity to bounce ideas and adapt existing resources meant we didn't have to “reinvent the wheel”. We were surprised how quickly we were able to put together an appropriate teaching programme using the expertise we had available. We realised it was really important not to work in isolation but to connect with those who had some expertise in the area we were interested in.

### Action Research: Action Plan

Prior to teaching the programme in Term 3 we decided to develop a tool for assessing the student's self-concept. This was based on a series of 20 questions, each with a scale ranging from 1-5, which students completed (several with the help of teacher aides). This gave us a baseline from which to try and measure whether our programme had made any difference to students' self-confidence and resilience. Over a three-week period students were exposed to a teaching programme with a heavy focus on role-plays, scenarios and problem-solving situations. These involved real-life examples where students were asked to anticipate how and why they would react in risky situations.

At the end of the programme the same assessment tool was used and the results were analysed. We were pleasantly surprised by the overall improvement in student resiliency as measured by this tool. The findings were supported by reports from teachers, teacher aides and parents of the students involved, many of whom noticed a perceptible increase in the students' self-confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness. While this tool is subjective, and student perception of what it means is variable, the tool itself became a learning resource because students began to question what others understood or meant by their responses. For example, one student said:

*Now I know what you've been doing for the last three weeks, you've been trying to get us to stand up for ourselves more.*

During Term 4 students watched a video that featured dangerous scenarios prepared by drama students from the CCE in consultation with the researchers. The students were shown the clips and then asked to respond by showing what they would do in the given situation. There was a noticeable reduction in naivety and an increase in positive and assertive behaviour. At the end of the programme students were asked what they had learned from the programme, and how they felt about the programme.

Overall, they were positive about what they had learned from the programme and many were able to come up with several strategies they could use to protect themselves during dangerous situations.

In reviewing the programme the researchers agreed it was a worthwhile project for the students and it will be continued with future classes. We also found that working collaboratively and tapping into outside expertise was a really worthwhile experience and brought a sense of achievement and discovery that was quite exciting. As one researcher stated, “If I had tried to do this on my own ... I would have given up”.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students were positively engaged in the programme, and in phase two of the action research project they had clearly retained the resilience strategies that had been taught in phase one. In discussion and role-plays, they showed more resilience to resisting dangerous situations, for example, declining drinks offered at a party. As a group, they were able to clearly identify risk situations and were able to generate a variety of responses that allowed them to avoid risk-taking behaviour. One of the surprises for us was that the programme we implemented was at level 5 of the curriculum, we had expected the students to be operating at around level 2.

Within this project our research facilitator helped us to learn how to gather and analyse data. We learned a lot about action research, about using data as a basis for informing teaching, targeting particular students, and finding out if our teaching was making a difference. We felt that it was important to have an outside research facilitator to keep us focused on the project. A member of our school's research team said that the process allowed her to continually review what she had learned as the project progressed. She said:

*I think also coming back to it a few times, numerous times, you've actually got that space to clarify a few things in your head and ask yourself a bit more ... to move on. Even though I found it frustrating at times because it felt like we were not getting anywhere. But it has helped.*

We also believed that our action research project was important, that it did bring changes to the school, and most importantly, the students benefited.

One of the research team stated:

*What I've found out about it is that it is incredibly important and what we're doing is only a small part of what is happening to these students. A small part, but I do think that it is incredibly important. The feedback from the students is that they think that it is important. They see it as important. They recognise the value of it, but there are so many things going in their lives.*

Like overseas travel, the planning and preparation can seem overwhelming, but travelling as a close-knit, supported group is mind-expanding, challenging, and really worthwhile.

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Alan Mears is the learning team leader of the Disability Resource Centre at Mairehau High School. He continues to teach the senior life skills class. Alan has worked in special education for nearly 30 years across a range of settings.

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Rosalie Stevenson was working at Mairehau High School during the EEPiSE project, but left at the end of 2005 to take up a position at Burnside High School as coordinator of the Learning Support Centre. She has worked in special education in a variety of settings over the past 20 years.

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