



At-risk students helped by hope

Despite facing numerous disadvantages, research indicates that hopefulness can function as a powerful protective factor in the lives of at-risk youth, enhancing their future aspirations and their ability to successfully handle life-changing events. In a paper published in the December edition of *Youth Studies Australia* (v.25, n.4), Nahid Kabir and Tony Rickards outline findings from their examination of hopefulness and opportunity within the life stories of 21 at-risk students in Years 10, 11 and 12 at a suburban high school in Perth, Western Australia. The study is part of the Smart Communities research project, which investigates ways to improve the life choices of at-risk youth in Western Australia.

Students participating in the study fell into three categories: 'established Australians', 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'African Refugee Australians'. Researchers asked students

a series of questions related to their life stories, with a particular focus on associations between their hopefulness and the density of their social networks, their level of acculturation (adoption of bicultural practices) and their fondness for music. Qualitative methods were used to identify connections, meanings and patterns in each student's life story and to compare their responses.

While all students expressed some hope for the future, responses indicated that refugee students had the widest and densest social networks, something researchers identify as a source of enhanced competence and stability among young people. The adoption of both 'home' and 'local' cultural practices (rather than direct assimilation into local culture) and a fondness for music may have helped students to sustain feelings of hopefulness, particularly those without a high-density social network.

These findings can assist carers and school staff in designing programs to enhance the wellbeing of at-risk students. To improve feelings of belonging and confidence among at-risk youth from migrant, refugee or Aboriginal backgrounds, Kabir and Rickards advocate the promotion of both home and local cultures within the school learning environment. They also advocate an 'interagency model of support' to improve communication between agencies supporting at-risk youth, and more team-building activities to strengthen the social networks of at-risk youth.

To find out more about Smart Communities, visit: smartcommunities.cci.ecu.edu.au/index.html

For information on multicultural youth issues, visit the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) website: www.cmyi.net.au/index.html

Extracts from Youth Monitor YSA v.25 N.4

Intervention strategies reduce risky behaviour

Intervention programs aimed at improving the social climate of schools can reduce students' risky behaviour, according to a study conducted by the Centre for Adolescent Health. In this four-year study, 12 Victorian schools developed intervention programs based around Year 8 students' feelings about school. After four years, surveys of subsequent Year 8 students from these schools show a 25% reduction in alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use, a 20% reduction in antisocial behaviour and a 50% reduction in sexual intercourse. Professor of Adolescent Health George Patton said that students from intervention group schools 'felt that school was a better place to be, that it had something to offer them and that they didn't have to look elsewhere for something to make them feel good about themselves'. (*Herald Sun*, 15/9/06, p.25; *Age*: 15/9/06, p.5; 18/9/06, p.14; *West Australian*, 16/9/06, p.58; *Sun Herald*, 24/9/06, p.27).

Call for teachers to heed brain development research

Edith Cowan University senior education lecturer Dr Lorraine Hammond believes that teachers ought to be mindful of research into the development of the teenage brain when planning their teaching strategies. 'Because the frontal lobes of their brains are still developing ... teenagers' ability to develop an argument, plan an essay, solve maths »

Abstracts from recent education-related youth studies

'The geeks shall inherit the earth': Girls' agency, subjectivity and empowerment

D.H. Currie, D.M. Kelly & S. Pomerantz, *Journal of Youth Studies*, v.9, n.4, 2006, pp.419-36.

Twenty-one 12–15-year-old girls were recruited for this critical feminist study from a larger Canadian study about girls' empowerment. Selected for their ability to express critical reflexivity regarding their location within the 'discursive context of school culture', these girls participated in semi-structured interviews to determine how they constructed self-representations that challenged notions of 'emphasised femininity' prevalent in their male-oriented peer culture. Girls discussed their feelings towards school, their participation in peer groups, and their attitudes towards feminism and 'other equality-seeking discourses'. Transcripts were analysed to examine participants' agency 'as evidenced by their self-expression and self-directed actions'. A 'symptomatic reading' of data indicated that girls' engagement in discourses of 'authentic selfhood' (particularly in relation to language, appearance and behaviour) enabled them to establish themselves against conventional girlhood. However, discourses also revealed participants' belief in gender equality as a realised ideal and an acceptance of gender essentialism, indicating that their ability to 'extend the boundaries of girlhood' did not include the agency necessary to transform gender norms.

Suicidal ideation in young males living in rural communities: Distance from school as a risk factor, youth engagement as a protective factor

L.L. Armstrong & I.G. Manion, *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, v.1, n.1, 2006, pp.102-13.

To better inform suicide prevention strategies for male youth living in rural and remote areas – a group at particular risk for suicide – geographic isolation and distance from school were examined as potential suicide risk factors among a sample of 242 students (113 males, mean age 16.3 years) from two rural secondary schools in Eastern Ontario, Canada. Engagement in structured extracurricular activities was examined as a possible protective factor for suicidality. Students completed self-reported questionnaires on suicidal ideation, demographic characteristics (including geographical location of home and distance from school), engagement in extracurricular activities and social support. Multiple regression analyses indicated that longer living distance from school was a significant suicide risk factor and a significant indicator of lower levels of extracurricular engagement among males only. Given this inverse relationship between extracurricular engagement and suicidality, future research should investigate the efficacy of accessible, community-oriented engagement programs for at-risk youth as a means of decreasing suicidal behaviour.



Extracts from Youth Monitor ...CONTINUED

« problems ... [are affected],» Dr Hammond said. She favours a process-oriented approach to educating teenagers rather than a traditional content-oriented approach and believes that teachers need to 'coach, mentor and support' young people's intellectual development by giving them explicit guidance and providing them with strategies to assist their thinking and learning, such as Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences and Edward De Bono's Six Thinking Hats. (*Age Education* supplement, 2/10/06, p.3).

Multi-tasking affects brain activity

A University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) study has found that multi-tasking while studying results in a diminished understanding of the material learned. In the study, a group of young people in their twenties was required to perform a sorting activity with and without aural distractions. Brain scans showed activity in the hippocampus (the area of the brain used to process and recall information) when participants performed the sorting task by itself, while brain activity shifted to the striatum (the area used for storing information about habitual tasks) when participants were multi-tasking. Study Co-author, Dr Russell Poldrack, said that knowledge gained by participants when multi-tasking was 'less flexible, meaning they could not extrapolate their knowledge to different contexts'. A report produced last year by the Kaiser Family Foundation in the USA found that close to 60% of students in Years 7 to 12 watched television, listened to music or used the internet for non-study purposes some or most of the time when studying at home (*West Australian* Health supplement, 4/10/06, p.6).

➤ Youth Field Xpress

Youth Field Xpress is a monthly electronic newsletter published by ACYS. It provides a summary of current issues in youth research and news from organisations working in the youth field. The December 2006 edition contains a number of items relevant to the education sector. To view the newsletter, visit: www.acys.utas.edu.au/yfx

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