

# THE BEGINNINGS OF RESILIENCE: A VIEW ACROSS CULTURES

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 47 (3), and a link to the Canadian Education Association (www.cea-ace.ca) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

FARAH WOULD LIKE HER NEW SCHOOL IN CANADA much better if people didn't yell insults at her. A 13-year old Moslem, she sometimes wishes her family would return to Palestine where she remembers people looked at her with respect. Even if the war meant she couldn't go to school every day, at least she could wear her headscarf proudly. Farah responds to the taunts by not acculturating. She remains devoutly religious. She insists her father knows best when it comes to making decisions that most western girls make for themselves.

It would be easy to judge Farah harshly. To wonder why she refuses to adopt Canadian ways – whatever we naively think those are. But speaking with Farah, one realizes that she is adapting very well to a threatening world. Her adherence to her culture and its values secures for her a powerful identity, connections to a large ethnic community, and a way of understanding herself as someone who copes well with adversity. Despite her exposure to war and prejudice, and the dislocations she has experienced, Farah remains a good student with hope for the future. Of course, her way of coping is different from that of other children. Once understood from her point of view, though, one sees how sensible it really is.

Children like Farah have much to teach us about what makes children survive and thrive. Too often, however, we fail to listen closely to their accounts of their experience. We fail to appreciate the many and varied paths children travel to resilience both inside and outside our schools.

## THE COMMON EXPERIENCE OF RESILIENCE

A close read of studies of children's development tells us that remarkably large numbers of children mature successfully despite exposure to poverty, war, violence, family displacement, cultural genocide, sexual abuse, physical injury, mental illness, loss of a parent, loneliness, hunger, neglect and the numerous other crimes we commit against children. We know now that, depending on the type and number of risks a child faces, and the length of exposure, between ten and eighty percent of children do as well as children who have not faced these same challenges. What we are learning from children like Farah who survive and thrive, the ones we term resilient, is that both individual and environmental factors can protect them.

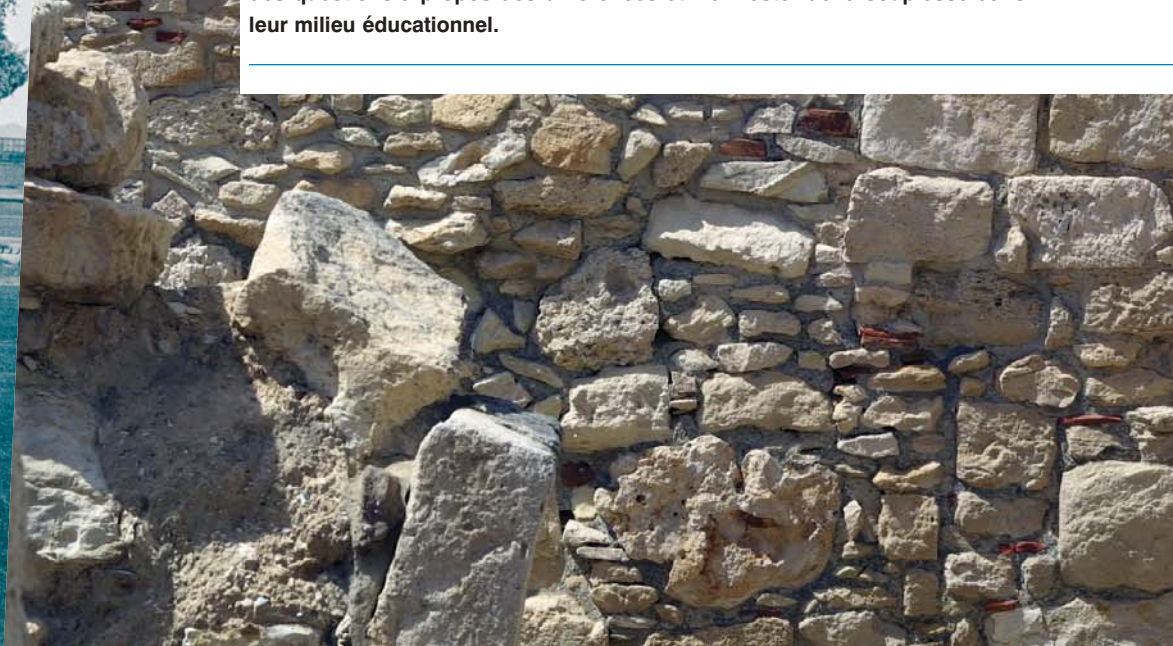
Unfortunately, what we know less about is the way in which children's cultures and contexts (rich or poor, urban or rural, able-bodied or disabled, mainstream or marginalized) shape their resilience. Most studies have been done with the small percentage of our children who live in western democracies. We have naively assumed that what is good for this small cohort is equally good for the other three billion children living in

**ACROSS CULTURES, WHAT IS A SUCCESSFUL CHILD? WHAT ARE THE BENCHMARKS OF**

**HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES? WHAT PROTECTS OUR CHILDREN**

**BEST FROM THE HARM CAUSED BY DIFFERENT RISK FACTORS?**





**EN BREF** Des études nous indiquent qu'un nombre remarquablement élevé d'enfants grandissent avec succès même s'ils sont exposés à la pauvreté, à la guerre, à la violence, à l'abus sexuel, à des blessures physiques et à une foule d'autres crimes que nous commettons contre les enfants. Les enfants qui survivent et qui s'épanouissent, que l'on qualifie de « résistants », nous apprennent que des facteurs à la fois individuels et environnementaux peuvent les protéger. Nous constatons aussi que ces facteurs de protection varient d'une culture à l'autre. La résistance n'est pas une qualité individuelle. Tout autant qu'une qualité de l'enfant, c'est une condition de la collectivité, de l'école, de la famille. Dans les collectivités pluralistes et multiculturelles du pays, nous trouverons probablement différentes définitions de ce qu'est que grandir avec succès. Les éducateurs doivent faire preuve d'humilité, poser des questions à propos des différences et manifester de la souplesse dans leur milieu éducationnel.

much less privileged environments, as well as those such as visible minorities and aboriginal peoples who are outsiders in their western contexts.

As we diversify both the participants of our research and the methods we use to capture children's stories of successful development under stress, we need to open ourselves to discovering new understandings of what makes a healthy child and a healthy community. Across cultures, what is a successful child? What are the benchmarks of healthy development in different communities? What protects our children best from the harm caused by different risk factors? And do all children feel the effects of their exposure to risk in the same way?

#### WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Decades of studies of resilience by researchers like Michael Rutter<sup>1</sup> have identified a host of protective mechanisms that help children grow. Each can be influenced by what happens at school. Among the most influential factors are:

- **Individual factors:** Schools can help children of different temperaments find ways to succeed. Schools provide a place that individual talents and skills can meet with *an appreciative audience*. A host of children's personal assets, such as an evoking personality, optimism, self-esteem and the feelings of efficacy that create an "I can do it" attitude, are all potentially nurtured in the classroom and on the playground.
- **Interpersonal factors:** Our children's relationships with their educators can *change the impact of exposure to risk*. We change the impact of a child's exposure to violence or

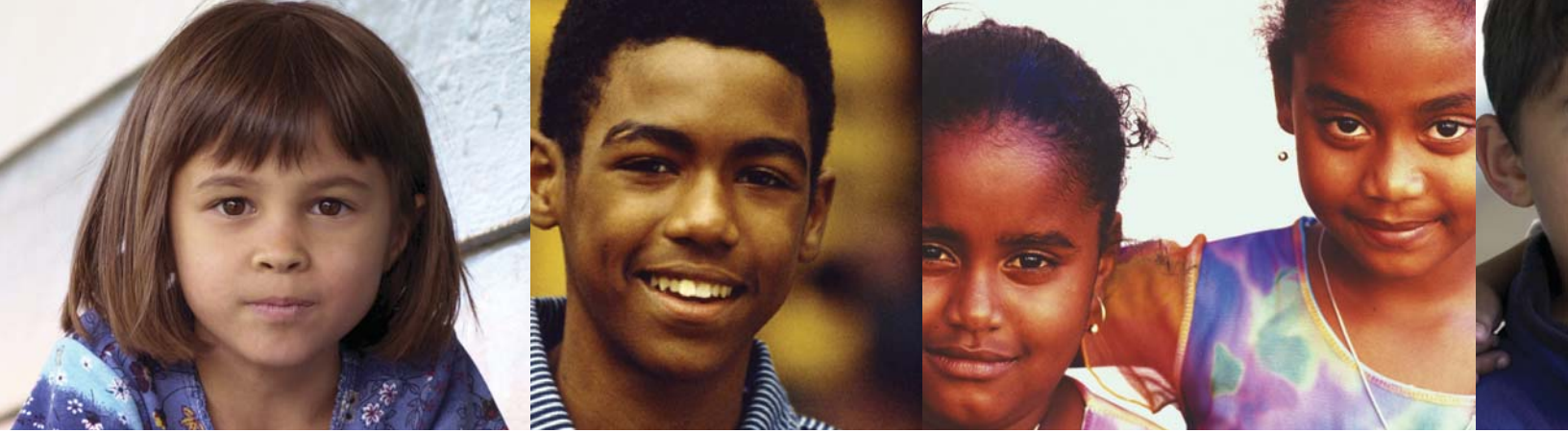
#### IT IS HOW WE EXPERIENCE THE RELATIONSHIPS WE HAVE WITH

#### OTHERS – EACH INTERACTION THE EMBODIMENT OF OUR CULTURE –

#### THAT DECIDES WHAT FACTORS PROTECT US FROM HARM.

poverty when we offer that child our mentorship, empathy, a safe school to which she can flee, and in the most extreme cases, a call to Child Welfare to investigate the home and prevent further harm. It is no coincidence that child neglect is most often reported when children are five and six years old. It is only then that the most disadvantaged become known to educators who are attuned to children's needs.

- **Institutional factors:** The structure and social supports found in our schools help children *prevent negative chain reactions* that might result from exposure to risk. Even the poorest of children, and the most neglected, can find at school a hot lunch program, a book buddy, a tutor, a one-on-one worker, or a speech pathologist. Combined, these resources can prevent the cumulative disadvantage the child faces from spiraling into a vicious cycle of transgenerational poverty, early school leaving, delinquency and other problems that plague children who grow up in dangerous or resource-poor environments.
- **Community factors:** As institutions inside communities, our schools and their staff can be a *force for change and cultural sensitivity*. It is not uncommon for our schools to lead when it comes to creating cultural pride and safe places for children to be themselves, whether that is



Aboriginal, African-Canadian or any other minority in the mosaic that makes up our country. Schools may also be spaces that *open up opportunities* for children to think outside the norms of their communities: to imagine themselves at university or employed in ways that exceed the expectations of their families.

#### **MANY PERSPECTIVES, MANY CHILDREN**

Most of what I know about resilience has come from the children and families with whom I've worked. No two have been exactly the same. My own experience in my own family has seldom been of much use helping me to understand people from different cultural backgrounds. When it comes to cultural differences, it is best to take a "not-knowing" approach.<sup>2</sup>

My daughter taught me the need for this humility as we tidied up after her tenth birthday party. One of her friends had given her a goldfish which she quickly named "Bubbles." We went in search of a fish bowl, finding an old glass canning jar to put him in. I thought Bubbles was well housed until that night, as my daughter was preparing for bed, she reminded me that Bubbles didn't have any of those fancy little stones at the bottom of his aquarium, nor any other fish to keep him company or any plastic plants to hide among. Upset and close to tears, she insisted we do something. "He's gonna be lonely and bored!" she cried. I'll admit, her comment stopped me saying anything for a moment. I had never considered that a goldfish could get bored. But then, if you're a rambunctious ten-year-old, that's the way you see the world: as a playground.

I've learned to be just as humble in my work with families. As helpers and educators, it is imperative that we remember to understand the world from the unique perspectives of others, even if those others are small children.

### **RESILIENCE IS NOT AN INDIVIDUAL QUALITY. IT IS A CONDITION OF THE COMMUNITY, THE SCHOOL, THE FAMILY, AS MUCH AS A QUALITY OF THE CHILD.**

#### **CULTURALLY-SPECIFIC PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

It is how we experience the relationships we have with others – each interaction the embodiment of our culture – that decides what factors protect us from harm. In Canada's north, the First Nations Innu of Sheshatshiu, Labrador, have made efforts to share their cultural heritage with their children. In communities that have rates of teen suicide higher than anywhere else in the world,<sup>3</sup> a focus on the transmission of culture is a worthy form of intervention. In fact, studies of factors that protect First Nations children against the identity crises that are associated with

suicide have shown that a strong sense of culture, and community resources to practice that culture, are essential to raising healthy children.<sup>4</sup> Children are encouraged to join their parents out on the land, to learn the ways of their nomadic elders who were forcibly settled in communities in the 1960s, and to take pride in their indigenous knowledge. Even if that means time away from formal schooling.

It is a community initiative that is proving that being a First Nations child is not in and of itself a risk factor. But being a First Nations child in a community that has experienced cultural genocide and lacks cultural continuity poses an extremely severe risk to a child's healthy development.

#### **14 VILLAGES**

It is a well-worn cliché to say it takes a village to raise a child. But research into the factors that predict a child's healthy growth, despite exposure to the compounding effects of multiple risks, tells us that our environments matter more than we think. Heavily influenced by the study of individual psychology, we have tended to de-emphasize those environmental factors that help children develop into *competent, caring contributors to their communities*.<sup>5</sup> To use the phrase of developmental psychologist Richard Lerner, children require 'plasticity,' the ability to adapt to environments in ways that get their needs met.<sup>6</sup>

But the environment must provide what the child needs. Resilience is not an individual quality. It is a condition of the community, the school, the family, as much as a quality of the child. It is no coincidence that in countries like Tanzania, where governments were forced by punitive and ideologically biased World Bank policies to cut social programs, including free access to education, that the rate of participation in school, especially among girls, has been so low, with less than half of young women getting past grade six.

Resilience, then, is not just an individual's capacity to overcome adversity. It is also the capacity of individuals' physical and social ecologies to provide what children need to be healthy. To be helpful, though, resources like education must be culturally meaningful. In other words, what we offer children from diverse cultural communities must be the kind of educational services they and their families value.

A team of researchers called the International Resilience Project ([www.resilienceproject.org](http://www.resilienceproject.org)) has been examining the factors related to resilience among young people from different cultures in fourteen communities.<sup>7</sup> Those communities, on five continents, in 11 countries, showed remarkable similarities in what they valued. Education was universally important. So too was a sense of one's culture, connections with family and a capacity to problem-solve. There were some factors that, while common, were emphasized much more in one setting than another. In





fact, when it came to more collectivist aspects of society, like a sense of cohesion (feeling a part of one's community and culture), religious affiliation and nationalism – all aspects of resilience – children in non-western countries said these were much more important parts of their lives than did their Canadian and American counterparts.

Of course, the story is much more complicated than that. Boys and girls show unique patterns as well, with differing concerns about equality, patterns of problem-solving, hopefulness, and participation in their communities. In fact, one of the more interesting findings from the study was that boys and girls in Canada and the United States (excluding First Nations children) had more in common with each other than children from non-western countries. Even more interesting, in non-western countries boys and girls showed distinctly different patterns of resilience; girls in Tanzania, Russia, Colombia and Hong Kong have more in common with each other than with the boys in their same communities.

#### MULTICULTURALISM AND EDUCATION

Such findings can tell us something about the differences we find in Canadian classrooms. As educators, to assume that all children (and their parents) define successful coping in the same way would be to overlook nuanced differences. Among the more culturally pluralistic communities in this country, we are likely to find many definitions of successful growth. While we might all agree that children deserve to be well clothed and fed, expectations on young children can vary by culture. In some cases, even young children are expected to care for siblings, or work alongside parents as a way of contributing to their families. There may be very different expectations for how boys and girls may behave in the classroom (are girls allowed to be as outgoing as boys?). Even the number of hours of study and homework expected by parents is likely to be different depending on the child's ethnicity.

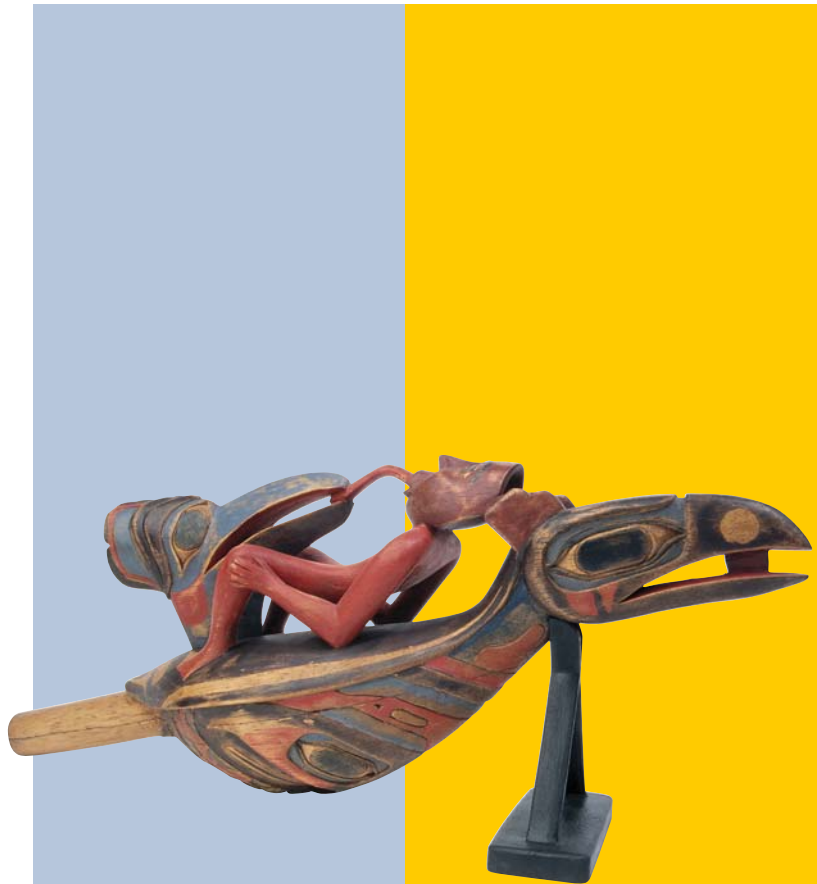
The problem is not these differences, but the judgments we make about them. Children in China, for example, are being raised in a highly competitive environment requiring long hours of study and extra tutoring. Parents may spend as much as 50 percent of their household income on supplementing their children's learning in order to give them an academic edge. Girls from more traditionally gendered societies may not see the value of girls participating in sports nor be permitted extra-curricular activities that include male students or male staff. First Nations children may feel the formality of education is overly ethnocentric and have a difficult time adjusting to a structure and discipline that may differ in quality from the way they are raised at home.

#### NAVIGATION AND NEGOTIATION FOR RESILIENCE

While these are all generalizations, they raise the need for educators to show humility, to ask about differences, and to demonstrate flexibility in the educational environment. In many schools, this is not new. Cultural diversity is embraced. Newcomers to Canada are encouraged to participate in their children's education. Support workers are being hired from the communities served. There is an earnest effort to promote tolerance and multiple points of view in the curriculum.

If we return to the definition of resilience that includes both a child who can cope and an environment (like a school) that provides the resources to help children cope, we can see the need for institutions to demonstrate sensitivity to the diversity of their students. This dynamic reflects an understanding of resilience as partly the outcome of a child's ability to *navigate* her way to health resources. The resources a child needs include:

- Access to material resources like food and clothing;
- Relationships with those who are important to her;
- An identity as powerful and respected;



- Experiences of control over the parts of her life which she should have some say over;
- A sense of her culture, and respect shown by others for what that culture says about her;
- Experiences of social justice, meaning that she experiences no prejudice based on her gender, race, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation or class;
- Social cohesion, the feeling that she is a part of something bigger.

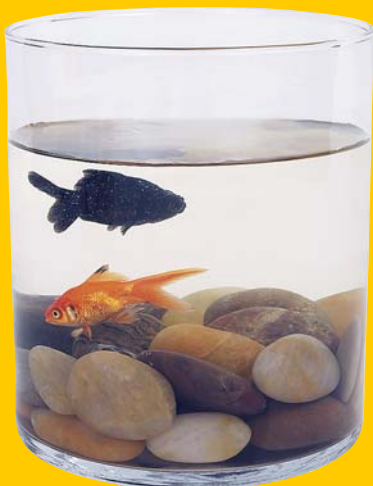
Resilience, though, is more than just being able to navigate one's way to each of these resources. As the story of Farah shows us, resilience is also the result of how well a community provides these resources in ways that a child values. It is for this reason that resilience is also an outcome of the child's ability to *negotiate* with others to secure what she needs in culturally meaningful ways. It is not enough to offer a child a school or daycare. What is offered must be provided in ways meaningful to those who need help. If, for example, as George Dei has found, education as it is offered is poorly tailored to the needs of African-Canadian youth, then it is unlikely these young people will participate for long.<sup>8</sup> Seen from their point of view, and filtered through their experience of prejudice, they are less likely to see as meaningful the opportunities school can provide if they perceive the doors to their future as closed.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

We can make headway in nurturing resilience among our most disadvantaged students by building on what we already know works. There are many stellar national programs creating culturally sensitive spaces for children to thrive. A survey of these efforts reminds us:

• **Don't believe everything you read:** Different communities have very individual definitions of what makes children resilient. There is a need to ask more and tell less when it comes to understanding cultural differences in what makes kids develop well under stress. Classrooms and curricula, expectations and institutional structures, are going to need to be customized.

• **All aspects of resilience are not created equal:** What protects a child best will change across cultures. It's important to ask children and families what health resource is the health resource that will make the greatest difference. Schools will need to emphasize different aspects of their curricula and different sources of support (like parent-teacher interaction) depending on the values of the families of the children with whom they work.



- **The Pathway to resilience is a many splendoured thing:** While the International Resilience Project found many commonalities between communities, the team also found many differences. How children in our communities navigate to health resources, and negotiate for what they need on their own terms, are as varied as the communities from which they come. There are many different ways schools can respond to children's culturally diverse needs. None is necessarily better than another.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes right down to it, designing classrooms that work for different cultures isn't all that different from demonstrating empathy for another's point of view, whether it is that of the child of a recent immigrant or a 10-year-old who sees the world from the perspective of her goldfish. There is a lot to be said for understanding the limits of what we know when it comes to understanding others. |

**MICHAEL UNGAR, Ph.D.** is the author of *Too Safe for their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive* (McClelland & Stewart, 2007). He has worked for over 20 years as a Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist with children and families in child welfare, mental health, educational and correctional settings. He is now a Professor at the School of Social Work, at Dalhousie University where he leads an international team of resilience researchers that spans 11 countries on five continents.

#### Notes

- 1 M. Rutter, "Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57 (1987): 316-331.
- 2 H. Anderson and H. Goolishian, "The Client is the Expert: A Not-knowing Approach to Therapy. In *Therapy as Social Construction*, eds. S. McNamee and K.J. Gergen (London: Sage, 1992): 25-39.
- 3 Innu Band Council, *Gathering Voices: Finding Strength to Help our Children*. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1995).
- 4 C. E. Lalonde, "Identity Formation and Cultural Resilience in Aboriginal Communities. In *Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare*, eds. R.J. Flynn, P.M. Dudding and J.G. Barber (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 2006): 52-71.
- 5 M. Ungar, *Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007).
- 6 R.M. Lerner, C. Brentano, E.M. Dowling, and P.M. Anderson, "Positive Youth Development: Thriving as the Basis of Personhood and Civil Society. In *Pathways to Positive Development Among Diverse Youth*, eds. R.M. Lerner, C.S. Taylor and A. Von Eye (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2002): 11-34.
- 7 M. Ungar, ed., *Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience Across Cultures and Contexts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005); M. Ungar, S. Clark, W.M. Kwong, A. Cameron and A. Makhnach, "Researching Resilience Across Cultures, *Journal of Cultural and Ethnic Social Work* 14, no. 3/4 (2005): 1-20.
- 8 G.J.S. Dei, J. Massuca, E. McIsaac, and J. Zine, *Reconstructing 'Drop-out': A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 9 Adapted from: M. Ungar, "Nurturing Hidden Resilience in At-risk Youth Across Cultures. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (2006): 53-58.