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Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Social Work**

at Massey University

Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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2010

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'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

## Abstract

This study used an ethnographic approach to explore the perceptions, interpretations and meanings young adults gave to the concepts of 'confidence' and 'building confidence'. Giving young adults viewpoints a central positioning reflected the researcher's perception of adolescents as active contributors not only to their own wellbeing, but also to the development of healthier communities and societies as a whole.

The research participants were Year 13 students in their last week of attendance at a co-educational state high school within a provincial New Zealand community. In support of the literature this study found that 'confidence' per se was not a concept explored often, but rather it was an assumed component of broader concepts like self-esteem. The young adults involved in this study shared the belief that confidence existed, involved emotion, was an enabler, and was generally attributed as being a desirable thing to have. As an outcome of their reflections an emergent definition of confidence was proposed, namely that **'confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others'**.

The young adults in this research project revealed a multitude of interconnected strategies for building self-confidence, and for supporting the building of confidence in others. As the researcher I was privileged to hear these insights first hand and recognized the potential value in this for schools. This has led to a recommendation that high schools routinely undertake exit interviews with their Year 13 students.

# Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my family, Mike, Ben and Sarah. You have shared this entire journey from beginning to end, with love, patience, and whole hearted support. Thank you.

# Acknowledgements

All research is supported and encouraged by many people, and in my case this goes back decades. I would like to acknowledge some special people who engaged and inspired the ‘researcher within me’ over the past years. These include Dr Ruth Flashoff, Dr Louise Signal, Alison Gray, Sue Johnson, Elinor Horner, and Don McAlister. To have been blessed with having spent many wonderful hours with such splendid minds, and people, has done much to nurture my quest for learning.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the schools involved in this study, the liaison staff, the cultural advisors, and particularly the young adults themselves who participated in this research project. Your insights, considerations, and contributions were most valuable, and made this research journey a most purposeful endeavour.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Massey University for providing this wonderful mechanism in which I have been able to engage in academic learning, namely extramural studies. I have completed most of my academic studies on a part time basis while juggling work and family commitments. I am cognisant of my grandmothers, Ivy Jensen and Matrona Shevchuk who due to war, the depression, children, domestic chores, and the low to non-existent value placed on educating women in those days, both completed their formal education at around 12 years of age. The Massey University extramural programme has provided me a vehicle through which I have been able to continue my studies. Without this opportunity my educational studies would have highly likely ended many years ago.

Lastly, my heartfelt thanks goes to my research supervisors, Dr Mary Nash and Helen Simmons, both of whom embraced my research journey while providing wise and patient guidance. Thank you.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

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### Introduction

The word ‘confidence’ is frequently used in everyday language, and in multiple contexts “yet rarely do we stop and think what it means” (Craig, 2007: p. 2). Rather, the word ‘confidence’ is used with an assumption that there is a commonly understood shared meaning. However, it could be that confidence is not something that can be defined as though it were an independent reality, since the interpretation of ‘confidence’ involves an ongoing reflexive process of individualised understanding. Etherington (2005) argues that a person’s whole view of reality “or what is (ontology), and ... understanding of what it means to know (epistemology) are intertwined” (p. 71). Reflecting on this, I propose that the shared meaning and understanding of confidence is not ever static, nor is it guaranteed across diverse communities (for example, ethnicities, genders, ages, socio-economic groupings). In actuality, ‘confidence’ may have multiple (and not always congruent) meanings, with contestable demonstrations of its presence.

If we take ‘confidence’ to be a word that describes an inner feeling or knowing, it is not easy to find a demonstration of ‘confidence’ that enables others to compare their meanings and interpretations, particularly if the comparison is across diverse contexts. As an example, a person who volunteers to be a group representative may be interpreted as being ‘confident’, or equally this behaviour could be interpreted as demonstrating arrogance. ‘Giving it a go’ at bungy jumping may be hailed by some people as a sign of ‘confidence’, while others may consider this to be a demonstration of stupidity and exhibitionism. A student putting their hand up to answer a question in class might be considered a demonstration of ‘confidence’ by the teacher, while some classmates may interpret this more as showing off, or perhaps attention seeking behaviour. Emotions like love, hate, sadness, happiness and anger are frequently expressed (verbally and non-verbally) in a manner that allows others to observe them. Laughter and tears, angry voices, warm smiles, hugs, punch ups and words of endearment are but a few examples.

These emotions also feature in the media via things like love songs, poetry, movies and documentaries which assist us to explore our shared meanings. These verbal and non-verbal expressions are not so clearly identifiable for ‘confidence’ (for example, what is a confident facial expression?) however this does not mean that ‘confidence’ is any less a powerful or significant emotion. It has been argued that “confidence is ... central to what we achieve in life” (Centre for confidence and wellbeing, 2009, p. 1). The significance of ‘confidence’ becomes clearer when we consider its absence. Anyone who has experienced a moment when their self-confidence eluded them has some understanding of how debilitating this can be. It is my belief that most people have had this experience at some time, and that the impact of this experience is generically debilitating for all.

To date much research on young people has focused on the problematic and dysfunctional in the hope of learning how to ‘avoid’, ‘protect from’ or perhaps ‘fix’, the undesirable (Miles, 2000, p.3). This focus on the potential for harm is arguably a lopsided and melodramatic approach to a young person’s journey towards adulthood. Disruptive and potentially harmful scenarios undoubtedly do exist, and researching these factors is essential and can be insightful when working towards enhancing well being. However, an equally insightful approach is to focus on those young people who are thriving, and explore the experiences, supports and circumstances that have enabled these young people to achieve success and wellbeing (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p.170; Kay, 2008, p. 11; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009).

This research project is motivated by a genuine curiosity around ‘confidence’ (and ‘building confidence’) from the perspective of young adults who are leaving high school with the aura of ‘success’ attached to them. How was this achieved? Recognizing that life is not a level playing field, and that “youth lifestyles ... do not operate independently of political and social change” (Miles, 2000, p.9) makes this curiosity even more valid. This study comes from a premise around self-confidence being an enabler as young people develop their potential, explore their passions, overcome barriers, focus, and thus increase their likelihood of experiencing ‘success’. Along with this is a premise around self-confidence (especially when partnered with life enhancing morals, values, and opportunities) empowering young people to develop positive interpersonal relationships, engage wholesomely in the wider community, develop into affirming parents (thus impacting inter-generationally), and experiencing a positive life

journey (McLaren, 2002, p. 8). It is my belief that confidence not only provides some protection in times of adversity, but also provides a vital key ingredient when pursuing the wellbeing and success of all young people, no matter what their life experiences or current circumstances.

## The Researcher's Position

*“Social scientists do not come to their work value-free, and it is important in the course of research that they make their own perspective clear”*

(Craig, 2003, p. 5).

It has been well argued that research is as much about the researcher as it is about the research. After all, “what we choose to investigate ... is inevitably shaped by our tastes, life experiences and perception of what is, and is not, important” (Matthewman, West-Newman, & Curtis, 2007, p. 8). Researchers impact on all aspects of study, for example Charles Wilbur revealed that “I am committed to certain values that undoubtedly influence the choice of questions asked and the range of variables considered for selection” (as cited in Crocker, 1991: p. 470). When analysing data it is inevitable that the values and beliefs of the person doing the analysing not only impacts on the interpretations made in the findings, but even impacts on which data gets attention, and which data is completely left out (Pawson, 1999; O’Leary, 2005). In this study it has been my decision to explore the topic of confidence, and I have had a major input in all aspects of shaping this research. Thus, in response to Fook’s (2002) assertion that “locating our own perspective or subject position in the discourse is ... crucial (this is a stance of reflexivity)” (p. 92), it is essential that I make my positioning transparent.

While the concept of ‘confidence’ has been included as a component part within broader concepts (like resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy), my life experiences and perceptions have more specifically identified ‘confidence’ of itself to be an essential

and integral ingredient to overall wellbeing. Perhaps ‘confidence’ of itself has a significant impact within these broader concepts along with having a ripple effect on a multitude of other factors, including income, education, relationships, opportunities, and even personal safety. In my early years I experienced several diverse and significant challenges (in various contexts) which essentially derailed me from mainstream society for many years. These experiences impacted on my self-confidence, and then the lack of self-confidence (of itself) impacted on my ability to re-engage with mainstream society. From this personal journey I have developed considerable knowledge around risk, building resilience, and life as an outsider, and from these experiences (or perhaps in spite of them) have managed to rebuild a healthy confidence base. However, one thing that has remained a curiosity is the building of confidence in its own right, and for its own merit, as distinct from building confidence as a protective factor from risk.

Having introduced the research, and located the positioning of the researcher, Chapter Two identifies the research question and provides some discussion as to the relevance of this research. Following this is a literature review on the key concepts of ‘confidence’, ‘young adult’, and ‘successful’, after which these key terms are operationally defined. Chapter Three introduces the ecological framework in relationship to this research, and discusses seven theoretical approaches that fit within the ecological framework and that have guided this research; namely social cognitive theory, developmental based psychosocial theory, resilience and strengths based theories, human capital theory, social capital theory, and social cohesion theory. Chapter Four discusses the three cultural contexts relevant to this study, being ‘youth’, ‘school’ and ‘Māori’. Chapter Five outlines the research methodology, research design, and some key ethical considerations. The research findings are shared in Chapter Six, with Chapter Seven providing a discussion of some of the key issues, and ending with a concluding statement.

## Chapter Two

# The Research Question

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“The words of the sixth-century philosopher Lao-Tse.

*If there is radiance in the soul, it will abound in the family*

*If there is radiance in the family, it will be abundant in the community*

*If there is radiance in the community, it will grow in the nation*

*If there is radiance in the nation, the universe will flourish”*

(cited in Pransky & McMillan, 2009, p. 257).

## Introduction

This chapter begins by identifying the research question, followed by some discussion on the relevance of this research within the context of today’s society. A literature review then explores a variety of meanings and interpretations given to the key terms of ‘confidence’, ‘successful’, and ‘young adult’. After this an operational definition for the purpose of this study has been made explicit for ‘young adult’ and ‘successful’.

‘Confidence’ has purposefully not been given an operational definition since defining confidence from a young adult’s perspective is one of the outcomes of this research.



## The Research Question :

**Successful young adults are asked – ‘In your experience, what builds confidence?’**

If our goal as social workers is to support our clients in their journey towards holistic wellbeing it makes sense to research those who are already on a positive journey in this direction. If we can identify “specific skills, beliefs, and experiences that promote positive subjective well-being, more successful prevention and intervention programs may be developed for all youth, including at-risk youth” (McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000, p. 288). Young adults with self confidence are more likely to pursue some form of training, embrace more challenging opportunities (Judge & Hurst, 2008, p. 852), tolerate frustration and repetition, and be more resilient to difficult scenarios as they arise (Cobb, 2007, p. 249; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, p. 175). It has been proposed that positive emotions (like self-confidence) can actually contribute to an upward spiral of overall emotional wellbeing (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, p. 172). For example, self-confidence could have a positive impact on relationships in general, which in turn could enhance people feeling positive about themselves, thus becoming more confident in their ability to have positive relationships (as they anticipate a positive response from others) (Cobb, 2007, p. 249).

Adolescent addictions, adolescent mental health, youth suicide, bulimia, teenage pregnancies, youth gangs and truancy are but a few examples of the disorder based thinking on which social workers have focused their attention, and thus developed expertise over the past few decades. “Social Work has constructed much of its theory and practice around the supposition that clients become clients because they have deficits, problems, pathologies, and diseases; that they are, in some essential way, flawed or weak” (Saleebey, 2009, p. 3). This focus on the dysfunctional reflects the assertion that society is “obsessed with, and fascinated by, psychopathology, victimization, abnormality, and moral and interpersonal aberrations” (Saleebey, 1997, p.3), an obsession which the media have arguably exploited in order to increase their ratings, and from which some ‘experts’ have made a lot of money.

In more recent times social work has made a shift towards exploring resilience along with a more strength based emphasis (Ungar (ed.), 2005). This historical deficit and dysfunctional focus has not been unique to social work research. Psychologists,

sociologists, educationalists and developmental theorists have also focused on the depressed, the stressed, the failures, the socially isolated, and youth at risk (Peterson, Balthazard, Waldman & Thatcher, 2008, p. 343; Wyn & Harris, 2004, p. 273; International Save the Children Alliance, 2001, p. 64; Saleeby, 1997, p. 5; Kay, 2008, p. 1). As Miles (2000) observed, “for too long the sociology has neglected what I will describe as ‘mainstream youth’ in favour of a sociology of the melodramatic and perhaps more worrying of the ‘problematic’ which as a result has underestimated the degree of complexity that characterizes young people’s lives” (p. 3). In the late 1990s psychologist Martin Seligman marked a shift in focus when he presented a view suggesting that “psychology should give at least an equal amount of attention to the study of human strengths, virtues and positivity, as compared to the study of human weakness, pathology, and negativity” (Peterson et al, 2008, p. 343). One of the more significant findings from this focus on the positive “is that being positive is not merely something with which you are born ... because the brain is plastic (changeable) ... you can train yourself toward having a happier outlook ... capacities such as optimism, hope, confidence, and resilience ... can be learned” (Peterson et al, 2008, p. 343). In more recent times the youth development movement captured the paradigm shift from deterrence to development in “the phrase *problem free is not fully prepared*, [which] has led to an increase in the acceptance of youth preparation and deterrence, as desirable goals” (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 170). Thus, finding out what successful young adults believe has contributed to building their ‘confidence’ may not only provide some useful insights, it may also reveal some strategies around ‘confidence building’ that could have some relevance for all people with an interest in this area (including teachers, parents, social workers, policy makers and young people themselves).

Chambers (1997) argued that people are involved in dynamic relationships, and that researching those in power is equally relevant to researching those who are powerless. In fact, Chambers (1997) believed that more ‘truth’ could be identified by exploring both ends of the power continuum (and the relationship between various aspects of the continuum) than can be revealed by just focusing on one end. It could be assumed that successful young adults are more likely to attain positions of power and authority within our communities. Thus, instead of the more usual path of researching the problematic youth, focusing on the successful young adult may well also provide some insight into

the experiences of the less successful, and the relationship dynamic between the two ends of this continuum.

Another relevance of this research relates to exploring and making sense of the impact that wider social change may have on young adults (Wyn & Harris, 2004, p. 272). A noticeable example of this relates to the impact that new technology may have on young adults. While older adults may have concerns regarding the use (and perceived over use) of iPods, cell phones and other recent technologies, these same very technologies may actually provide a whole new platform through which young people learn from, and connect with, their family, friends and the wider global community. Providing an opportunity for young adults to share their meanings and interpretations with regards to building confidence may provide some useful insights regarding the contribution that today's technologies may have.

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter (a lecturer at Harvard Business School), confidence is central to individual performance, and thus filters through to all aspects of society as a whole.

Confidence influences the willingness to invest – to commit money, time, reputation, emotional energy, or other resources – or to withhold or hedge investments. This investment, or its absence, shapes the ability to perform. In that sense, confidence lies at the heart of civilization. Everything about an economy, a society, an organization, or a team depends on it (Kanter, 2004, p. 7).

It is easy to identify a similarity between Kanter's (2004) analysis and that of the philosopher Lao-Tse quoted on page five of this report. Thus, gaining some insight into what builds confidence according to the experiences of young adults may provide some insight into how to nurture the positive ripple of confidence from the individual to families, communities, and societies as a whole. With this in mind, the Scottish Government saw this as being so important that they made 'confidence' one of the four key purposes and principles for education in their 'Curriculum for Excellence for 3 to 18 year olds which they began implementing in 2004. "Our aspiration is to enable all children to develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society" (The Scottish Government, 2004, p.1). This approach was reflected locally when Mary Chamberlain (a New Zealand Ministry of Education employee who for the past six years has been leading the

development of our new curriculum) was reported to have proposed that the purpose of NZ's new curriculum was "to build confident, motivated and resourceful young people who could relate well to others, contribute to New Zealand, think critically, actively seek knowledge and be lifelong learners" (Longmore, 2010, p. 7).

Models of human development have highlighted various ages and stages within which (as a general guideline) certain milestones are achieved. This research has focused on young adults because the analytical and reflexive capabilities required for this study are "probably not achieved until adolescence, for it is undoubtedly dependent on cognitive development, including the ability to consider the realm of possibility and of reality" (Saarni, Campos, Camras & Witherington, 2008, p. 394).

## **Exploring the Key Concepts**

### **Introduction**

The key concepts in this study include 'confidence', 'success', and 'young adult'. All of these concepts are contextual. This literature review used libraries, web searches, and everyday publications (like magazines and newspapers) to explore some of the current thinking around the issues and contexts that underpin these concepts. The key words used for the library and web searches were 'confidence', 'self-esteem', 'youth', 'adolescent', 'teenager', 'young adult', and 'successful'. This literature review occurred primarily between February and November, 2009.

### **Confidence**

When I began this research journey I never thought for a moment that 'confidence' would be hard to define. After all, 'confidence' is a word very much used in everyday language, and within a multitude of contexts. However, when exploring the literature it became apparent that little of the research around youth even mentions 'confidence'. Rather, there seems to be an assumption that 'confidence' fits within the framework of broader concepts (like self-esteem, self-efficacy and resilience). One example of this relates to the internationally renowned Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Longitudinal Study which has followed the life course of a cohort of 1037 babies born in Dunedin between 1 April 1972 and 31 March 1973 (University of Otago, 2010, p. 1). This multi-faceted study has followed the development, health and

wellbeing of this cohort of babies over the past thirty-five years, and as a result has made numerous significant contributions to knowledge and research internationally. In a response to an email query regarding the exploration of 'confidence', their response was "to date, we have not looked at 'confidence', and the building of confidence, in the Dunedin Study" (M. McCann, personal communication, July 14, 2009).

The New Oxford Dictionary of English defined 'confidence' as "a feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities" (Pearsall, 1998, p. 385), while 'self-confidence' was defined as "a feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities, and judgement" (Pearsall, 1998, p. 1686). The difficulty with these two definitions is that they both hinge on the interpretation given to two other concepts of 'inner feelings and inner knowing', namely 'self-assurance' and 'trust', which does not initially assist the journey towards identifying a shared meaning. Miller and Rollnick (2002) define confidence as "the term we use to describe the extent to which a person feels able to change" (p. 111). This definition arguably misses the essence of confidence (or is perhaps context specific) in that people can equally be confident in (and content with) their inability to change, or their ability not to change.

When exploring lessons of leadership from the ancient world, Cotterell, Lowe and Shaw (2006) found that 'confidence' arose from having a deep and realistic knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses, and a self-belief in the accuracy of this knowledge. This approach to defining confidence has a higher level of intensity as compared to the New Oxford Dictionary of English, which may reflect the more volatile context of the ancient world. However, perhaps it is in more volatile environments that 'inner feelings and inner knowing' become more intense, thus making them easier to more specifically identify. But even in this context 'self-belief' remains a concept open to interpretation.

In her Master's Thesis titled 'Ring of Confidence' Ailaoa Aoina (2006) defined confidence as "freedom from doubt; belief in yourself and your abilities" (p. 2). While having some similarities with the above definitions, Aoina has added the notion of what confidence is not, in that it is not 'doubt'. She has continued by saying that self-confidence "is generally perceived as having the courage to speak in front of a large number of people, the willingness to try something new, the willingness to go against what others are thinking or doing, the ability to comfortably do something he or she

could not do and/or the willingness to explore what has not been explored” (Ailaoa Aoina, 2006; p. 2). Aoina’s perception of self-confidence has a positioning that involves being separate from the crowd, and exploring new frontiers. Underpinning this is a belief that ‘standing out’ is a positive thing. Compare this to a confidence positioning that involves being immersed within the crowd, for example, being a fully accepted and compliant member of a group, like a peer group, or a religious group. In these scenarios going ‘with’ the crowd, and being ‘part of’ the crowd may also demonstrate ‘confidence’. The belief that speaking in front of a crowd is an indicator of confidence (Aoina, 2006) has been challenged by Craig (2007) who proposes that quiet loners may equally be confident (p. 4). There are many examples of explorers and adventurers who would fit this description. Thus, defining confidence in relationship to a group context, (be that standing out, blending in, or withdrawing) may be limiting.

In Turner and Stets (2005, p. 308) ‘The Sociology of Emotion’, ‘confidence’ has been used in association with a person who has material wealth and power in the belief that these people tend to have more control and influence over their circumstances. However, while this might be the case (and, arguably, it might not always be the case), ‘confidence’ is surely also possible amongst the powerless and the poor? For example, a street busker may be confident in her ability to earn enough money for some food, or a politically powerless person may be confident in her place of belonging within her family and her cultural heritage. So, perhaps ‘confidence’ is actually a fluid and dynamic emotion, in that it is possible to be confident in selected areas, in particular contexts, and for a certain time frame.

Nobel Laureate Merton (1968) argued that “self-confidence [enabled people to have] ... a great capacity to tolerate frustration in their work, absorbing repeated failures without manifest psychological damage” (p. 61, cited in Judge & Hurst, 2008, p. 849). Along the same lines Couch and Liamputtong (2007) commented that self-confident people have an increased ability to manage, and limit any risk, or potential risk that they identify (p. 275). In recent years researchers have developed the concept of resilience to denote this ability to successfully engage with risk and adversity (Mackay, 2003, p. 99).

Resilience has been defined as

the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being; ... the capacity of individuals’ physical and social ecologies to provide these

resources; and ... the capacity of individuals and their families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared (Ungar, 2008, p. 22-23).

Within this definition it is not hard to identify a role that confidence (along with many other factors) might play, even if confidence per se is seldom specifically identified. Mackay (2003) notes that “resilience is not a categorical state, but a continuum (families can be more or less resilient) and that it is contingent (families may be resilient in some circumstances but not others)” (p. 99). Interestingly, these same comments could also fit for confidence, and suggest that there could be value in exploring the relationship between confidence (be that at the individual, community, or societal level) and resilience.

While much research on resilience does not specifically explore the role of confidence, Ginsberg (2006) did identify confidence as being one of seven core factors that build resilience. In his guide to parents for building resilience in children and teens, Ginsberg (2006) commented that

true confidence, the solid belief in one’s own abilities, is rooted in competence. Children gain confidence by demonstrating their competence in real situations. Confidence is not warm-and-fuzzy self-esteem that supposedly results from telling kids they’re special or precious (cited in Engler, 2007, p. 33).

While this may provide some useful ‘self-help’ suggestions for parents’, it is possible to be confident in one’s own incompetence, and to some degree this can be a life saving quality. For example, a young person who is confident in their assessment of their swimming incompetence, and confident to act on this, may well choose not to swim across a wide river. Similarly, a young person who is confident in their knowledge that they are an incompetent driver may well choose not to drive. Ginsberg (2006) continues by linking the development of confidence to the supports and resources of the wider community, with his comment that “children who experience their own competence and also know they are safe and protected develop a deep-seated security that promotes the confidence to face and cope with life’s challenges” (cited in Engler, 2007, p. 33).

This linking of the building of confidence to resources and support was re-iterated in a recent newspaper article in which a journalist visited a home for teen parents. In this article Chapman (2009) commented on one of the teen parents, noting that the house seemed to give her confidence. She then quoted the teen parent as saying “It just made me stronger as a person, and stronger in believing that I would be a good mother” (Lenihan, as cited in Chapman, 2009, p. D3). In this scenario the building of confidence was linked to a safe place in which the teen parent’s primary needs were being met, and where she had a sense of being supported and appropriately up-skilled. In a similar vein Goldstein (2002) associated the building of self-confidence with pragmatic ‘survival’. “When a child or adult takes risks or survives a serious threat, new skills and greater self-confidence accrue. These gains fuel the individual to dare and test herself in other venues of her life” (p. 31). These arguments can be linked to the study of resilience and social capital, and it will be interesting to find out if ‘successful’ young adults also cite resources, safety, support, up-skilling and survival as key factors in building confidence.

In her book titled ‘Creating Confidence’ Craig describes confidence as

not simply a feeling that things will go well but also a judgement on our own or other’s abilities. When the abilities in question are our own, having confidence suggests a high level of self-assurance. Since confidence involves the belief that things will turn out well, confidence may sometimes be used interchangeably with optimism (2007, p. 2).

Craig (2007) does not see confidence as being a type of activity, but rather that “it is an individual’s belief that they can reach their self-determined goal and that the future is bright” (p. 5). Craig’s contribution to the debate offers a paradigm shift from a focus on resilience and protectiveness to a focus on optimism and the wider horizon of possibilities. This arguably narrows the spectrum of confidence to the notion of achievement, in that it does not cater, for example, for those students who are confident that they have failed an exam.

Near the end of his inaugural address Barak Obama (2009) identified what he believed to be the source of confidence.

What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world,



duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship. This is the source of our confidence – the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny (Obama, 2009, p. 13).

Within these words Obama has identified citizenship, common goals in the face of adversity, collective responsibility, and spiritual direction as factors that underpin a form of collective confidence. It will be interesting to see if the young adults in this research study identify any of these factors as contributors to their confidence.

‘Confidence’ is a central concept in this research project. Reviewing the literature has revealed that while ‘confidence’ has featured, it has seldom been the focus of research in its own right, and is often discussed in an implied or assumptive manner within broader concepts. This has been at the individualised level (like self-assurance, self-esteem, and resilience) or at community, or even the global level (like citizenship), all of which have been identified as useful aspirations (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 180; Obama, 2009). This research study has focused specifically on the interpretations and meanings given by successful young adults from provincial New Zealand as they explored ‘confidence’ and ‘confidence building’.

The literature review reinforced the perception that ‘confidence’ can have multiple meanings, interpretations, and underlying assumptions. Next the concept of ‘young adult’ is explored in order to identify an operational definition for the purpose of this research.

## Young adult

The International Save the Children Alliance (2001) proposed that ages and stages of human development are based within cultural contexts, and vary between western and developing cultures. In western society young people tend to be kept at home, remain in formal education, and be economically dependent on their families until their late teens, or even longer (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 322). Alongside this, they are encouraged to develop independent thinking and to explore their individual identity within their wider context. However, in developing countries almost the reverse is true.

Many children as young as seven years are making a substantial economic contribution and often take significant levels of responsibility. Yet they are neither expected nor encouraged to exert autonomous influence over their lives, make choices or act independently within the family or community (International Save the Children Alliance, 2001, p. 68).

This research occurred within a western society, so the western framework of ‘young adult’ as an age and stage of development has been utilised. In recognition that Māori are tangata whenua within this western society, a specific focus on a Māori perspective as it relates to young adults and ‘confidence’ has been included in Chapter Four of this report titled ‘Cultural Contexts’.

Young people’s identities are “contextual and are culturally and structurally determined; they are tied to a grid of social roles, statuses, groups and networks” (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003, p. 338). When looking at how New Zealand Society (via New Zealand statutes and policies) conceptualises the developmental stages of New Zealand young people, it can become confusing. According to New Zealand law by 16 years of age a person is considered developmentally old enough to leave school, live with a partner, have sex (and thus become a parent), get a tattoo, get married or have a civil union (with their parents consent) (Waikato University, 2009, p. 1; Ministry of Justice, 2009). Exactly twelve months later (by 17 years of age) young people are deemed old enough to have a full driver’s licence. In a further twelve months (at 18 years of age) young people are considered developmentally ready to manage addiction (they can now legally buy alcohol, cigarettes and a scratchy or lotto ticket), get married or have a civil union without parental consent, and join the police force (Waikato University, 2009, p. 1). Considering that the majority of students who complete high school will be 18 years of age (or close to this age) by the time they leave school, it would seem appropriate to follow the parameters set by New Zealand society (as demonstrated through the statutes), and consider them to be young adults at this point. Interestingly, the United Nations (through their Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989) has defined a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations, cited in the International Save the Children Alliance, 2001, p. 105).

Unlike the range of nouns used to identify the changes that occur between birth and childhood (like newborn, post-natal, baby, crawler, infant, toddler, and pre-schooler), the nouns used to identify the stages between childhood and adulthood are few, and not particularly enlightening. ‘Teenager’ is basically any person in their teens (thirteen to nineteen years of age), whereas adolescence has been defined as “the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult” (Pearsall (ed.), 1998, p. 23). Neither of these are particularly useful when trying to specifically identify the stage of development when a person has developed higher order cognitive abilities and adult status. There is a noticeable difference between a thirteen year old and an eighteen year old, which any visit to a high school would demonstrate. Arnett (2000, cited in Miller & Rollnick, 2002) has proposed a concept he called ‘emerging adult’, suggesting that “individuals within the rough age span of 18 to 25 are demographically, subjectively, and psychologically different from both younger (adolescent) and older (adult) age groups” (pp. 321-322). This category captures those who by right of age have legal entitlements primarily the same as adults, while recognising that full adult maturity and responsibilities may not yet have been attained (for example: identity development, financial obligations, responsibility for dependants, and community responsibilities).

Models of human development have highlighted various ages and stages when (as a general guideline) certain capabilities and milestones have been achieved. This research project asked young adults to explore the meanings and interpretations they gave to the concepts of ‘confidence’ and ‘building confidence’. Undertaking this reflexive process requires a certain level of analytical capability which is “probably not achieved until adolescence, for it is undoubtedly dependent on cognitive development, including the ability to consider the realm of possibility and of reality” (Saarni, Campos, Camras & Witherington, 2008, p. 394). Based on the available literature and research this study has assumed that most 18 year olds have developmentally achieved higher order analytical capabilities, and recognised that most of our statutes placed 18 year olds in the same category as ‘adults’.

Next the concept of ‘successful’ is explored in order to provide an operational definition for the purpose of this research.

## Successful

It is well documented that the notion of ‘success’ is entirely open to contextual interpretation. The young man who is the leader of a notorious and powerful gang is quite likely to be considered a ‘success’ within his gang community. The young woman who has found spiritual enlightenment is probably hailed as a ‘success’ within her spiritual community. The homeless mum who finally receives the offer of a house to rent is no doubt considered ‘successful’ amongst others seeking housing. The young man who makes a lot of money on a share market investment is likely to be considered ‘successful’ within a capitalist context. The burglar who doesn’t get caught is probably considered ‘successful’ amongst the criminal fraternity. Whether it be an intrinsic or extrinsic factor (Judge & Hurst, 2008, p. 850), the interpretation of ‘success’ is inextricably linked to what is considered to be ‘successful’.

Within a school context educationalists’ have argued that academic intelligence is, of itself, not a particularly accurate predictor of success in adulthood (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2006). Rather, individual factors like work habits, determination, self confidence and the ability to pick oneself up and carry on when things get tough (resilience) are more accurate predictors of success. “Adolescents with high ideal self-images are better adjusted: They are more reflective, do better in school, tolerate frustration better, and are more resilient to stress” (Cobb, 2007, p. 249). Along with the individualised perspective, family, community and societal factors like social capital, resources, and equitable opportunities can impact on ‘success’ (Ungar, 2008).

The link between ‘success’ and ‘building confidence’ is not difficult to imagine. Kanter (2004) identified this link when she wrote “success provides the resources, the pride, the enthusiasm that make it easier to succeed the next time ... [ thus building] confidence” (p. 11). This mutually reinforcing and cyclic relationship between success and confidence can equally occur in the other direction. That is, failure can undermine confidence, which can in turn lead to failure. Kanter has proposed that failure and success are not so much episodes as they are trajectories, in that

they are tendencies, directions, pathways. Each decision, each time at bat, each tennis serve, each business quarter, each school year seems like a new event, but the next performance is shaped by what happened last time out, unless something

breaks the streak. The meaning of any particular event is shaped by what's come before (Kanter, 2004, p. 9).

Kanter continued by arguing that success is inextricably linked to confidence, and not just by confidence within, but also by the confidence placed in a person by significant others. "Confidence on the part of teachers and parents encouraged greater engagement with students, which meant more attention to school and school work, which made it more likely to get results that justified feeling confident" (Kanter, 2004, p. 208). In a continuation of this theme Saleeby (2009, p. 9) asserted that language and words had a powerful influence on a person's self-image, and their trajectory. "They can elevate and inspire or demoralize and destroy ... words are a part of the nutriment that feeds one's sense of self" (Saleeby, 2009, p. 9). In this study the participating young adults have been identified as 'successful' within their school context, and been given titles (like house leader, top of sciences, mentor, spokesperson, sports captain) in which the titles of themselves reflect this trajectory of success.

Having explored the concepts of 'successful', 'young adult' and 'confidence' their operational definitions for the purpose of this study are now identified.

## Operational Definitions

### Introduction

"Definitional choices ... have significant consequences for what is analysed, [and] what is measured" (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002, p. 6, cited in Spoonley, Peace, Butcher & O'Neill, 2005, p. 89). In order to be transparent about the definitional choices utilised in this study, the operational definitions of the key concepts of 'success' and 'young adult' have been made explicit below. These are based on experiential knowledge and the literature review. Along with this, there is an explanation of why no operational definition of 'confidence' has been made at this stage.

## Successful

For the purpose of this research ‘successful’ has been defined as a student who has been identified by their school Principal (or nominated delegate) to have fulfilled at least one of the following:

- A student who was given a leadership role at their school in 2009. For example, sports captain, kapa haka leader, prefect, cultural committee member.
- A student who received an award at their school’s end of year Senior Prize Giving ceremony in 2009. For example, an academic award, an award for citizenship, an award for best debater, a sport related award.

## Young Adult

For the purpose of this research a ‘young adult’ has been defined as a student in Level 13 attending High School. This did not include students who had returned to education after some time away. These students were either 17 or 18 years of age. Other terms like ‘young person’, ‘adolescent’, ‘Level 13 student’, ‘Year 13 student’ and ‘youth’ used within this report refer to the more generalist population.

## Confidence

The purpose of this research was to explore the interpretations and meanings given to the concepts of ‘confidence’ and ‘building confidence’ by young adults. From the data collected in this research a definition of ‘confidence’ did emerge and is presented as a part of the findings (see page 76 of this report). This, of itself, is a significant outcome of this study.

This chapter began by stating the research question, after which there was a discussion as to the relevance of this question. A literature review followed discussing the three key concepts that feature in the research question, namely ‘confidence’, ‘young adult’, and ‘successful’. Having completed this task, operational definitions for the purpose of this study have been provided. The next chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks that have been used to guide this research project.

## Chapter Three

# Using an Ecological Framework

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### Introduction

*“As youth around the world continue to teach us, we realize with increasing confidence that in spite of cultural variations, all youth rely on the resources of an ‘ecological model”*

(Liebenberg & Ungar, 2008, pp. 4-5).

A central thesis of the ecological framework is “that the conditions under which human beings live have a powerful effect on how they develop” (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, as cited in Pence, 1988, p. x). These conditions include things like family of origin, socio-economic status, cultural heritage, spiritual beliefs, friendship groups, education, employment opportunities, along with community and societal factors. Even global conditions can impact on a person’s opportunities for development as the recent international recession has demonstrated. The realisation that individuals are positioned within the context of their wider environment has been “a hallmark of social work since it emerged as a discipline” (Coady & Lehmann, 2008, p. 91) and is now taken for granted in the field of social work (Ungar, 2008, p. 17; Saleebey, 2002, p. 230) which uses the ecological analysis not only to identify risks and strengths, but also to identify appropriate and achievable interventions (Coady & Lehmann, 2008, p. 91). These interventions may be with an individual, with the family, or they may be located in the wider community since the “ecological approach ... encourages a greater utilisation of community resources and community wisdom” (Durie, 2003, p. 156).

Using the ecological framework for this research study has encouraged a broader analysis when reflecting on ‘confidence’ and ‘building confidence’. As Callister, Didham & Kivi (2009) suggested, it is not just about who we want to be, “the issue is also who other people will let us be” (p. 43).

## **Overview of the Ecological Framework**

The ecological approach to understanding human behaviour reminds us that no person operates in isolation, and that every step in a life journey is relational, interdependent, and dynamic within broader social and cultural contexts. This realisation is by no means new. Gauvain and Cole (1993) identified what they believed to be the first published study of a research project based on an ecological framework. This project was carried out in Berlin in 1870 and involved an exploration of the impact that neighbourhoods had on children’s development (Gauvain & Cole, 1993, p. 37). However, like many concepts that evolve over time there is often an identifiable moment when a particular person (or persons’) collates strands of thought into a new united whole. This appears to have been the case with the ecological framework when, in the early 1970s, Bronfenbrenner began developing a conceptual and operational framework for the ecological model of human development.

Although I am sometimes identified ... as the originator of this perspective, that designation claims too much. Perhaps the most that can be said is that mine was the first attempt to give the paradigm systematic form; thus, my role was more that of a scientist-historian who discerned in the work done by different investigators, in different branches of the field, certain common and complementary features that pointed to an emerging new conceptual model (Bronfenbrenner, cited in Pence, 1988, p. ix).

Bronfenbrenner was born in Moscow, Russia in 1917 (Engler, 2007, p. 10), and was in his 50s when he proposed his Ecological Systems Theory. The dominant models in the western world at that time (the 1960s and 1970s) focused almost entirely on the individual (for example the psychodynamic and the psychotherapeutic approaches), but Bronfenbrenner proposed that individuals are located within wider communities on which they depend, interact, and influence in a multi-dimensional manner (Coady &



Lehmann, 2008; Ungar, 2008). Forty years later Bronfenbrenner continued to stand by what he has termed the ‘cornerstone’ definition of his theoretical structure, being that

the ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, *throughout the life course*, between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded (Bronfenbrenner (ed.), 2005, p. 107).

In the 1990s Bronfenbrenner further expanded his Ecological Systems Theory when he (and colleagues) included the dynamic of genetics on human development (Gauvin & Cole, 1993, p. 41). At this time “Bronfenbrenner recognised his theory would be incomplete until he included in it the levels of individual structure (biology, psychology, and behaviour)” (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv). Some examples of this included the DNA components that impact on physique, gender, intellectual capabilities, health, and personality.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory has been conceptualised into five distinct nested layers (see Figure One, page 24 of this report) which are relational, dynamic, interconnected, and interdependent. These layers include:

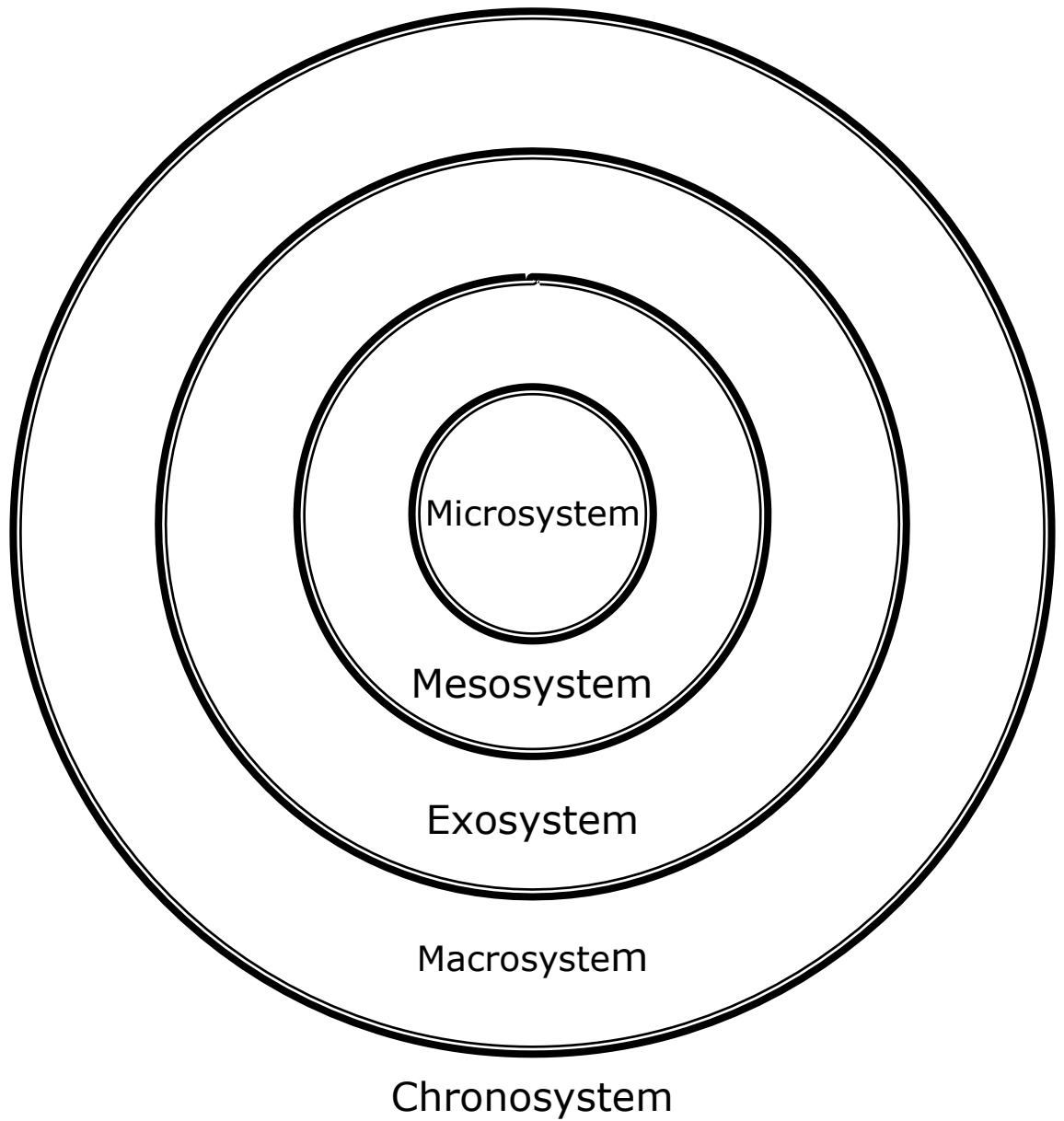
- 1) **The Microsystem.** This layer is the closest to the individual, and encompasses the dynamic and interactive nature of an individual’s innate abilities (DNA), internalised processes, along with the interactions and relationships that a person has with their immediate surroundings (including family, friends, peer group, school, and work).
- 2) **The Mesosystem.** This layer encompasses the interactions and relationships that occur between the factors in the microsystem. Examples of this include the connection between a child’s parent and a child’s teacher, or perhaps the relationship between an individual’s peer group and their family.
- 3) **The Exosystem.** This layer encompasses the interactions and relationships between an individual, and the larger social system with which that individual may have no personal contact. The dynamics and interactions at this level connect the state (and other large systems) to the individual. Examples of this

include City Councils (which decide on things like sewerage, rubbish, and libraries) and the State (which decides on things like the education curriculum).

- 4) **The Macrosystem.** This layer involves the wider context of values, beliefs, and laws that underpin the political and economic composition of society. Wealth, power and authority are implicit within the macro-structures that impact on an individual's cultural and societal context. Examples of this include laws based on issues of morality (like homosexuality, abortion, parental discipline, needs or rights based legislation that impacts on benefits), and laws that underpin economic frameworks (like taxation).
- 5) **The Chronosystem.** This layer involves the element of time. Examples of this include physiological changes over time, the timing of significant events like the death of a loved one, and the epoch in which a person grows up (like the great depression, or today's technological epoch) (Paquette & Ryan, n.d., p. 2; Gauvin & Cole, 1993, p. 40; Callister, Didham and Kivi, 2009, pp. 9-10; Lerner, 2005, p. xiii; Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 147).

There have been numerous visualisations of the ecological model, but arguably the simplest and most common involves the five layers of the model nested one inside the other, with the microsystem being at the centre, and the chronosystem being the outer layer encompassing all the other layers (see Figure One on the next page).

**Figure One:** The Nested Layers of the Ecological Framework



The ecological framework has been criticised for being too abstract and metaphorical, which impacts on its ability to be useful in the applied profession of social work (Coady & Lehmann, 2008, p. 91). This criticism proposes that, by its very nature, the model is too open-ended, encouraging multiple interpretations and thus having limited practical use (Coady & Lehmann, 2008, p. 92). Another criticism is that focusing on the wider relational aspects of a person's scenario may have an outcome of adaptation in which an individual is expected to adapt to the ways of the wider community and society. While in some instances this may be a positive outcome, there is a risk that professionals like social workers are actually perpetuating social injustices (like oppression and assimilation) by encouraging (overtly or covertly) their client group to adapt to the dominant norm (Coady & Lehmann, 2008, p. 92). The above criticisms provide insightful caution when using an ecological analysis.

## **Other theories and perspectives that fit within the ecological framework and inform this research**

### **Introduction**

As Coady and Lehmann (2008, pp. 91-92) have argued, the ecological model can be so abstract and open-ended as to have limited practical use. In order to utilise such a broad conceptual framework this research has drawn on seven other theories that can be located within the ecological model in order to provide some focus when analysing the data. These theories and perspectives include social cognitive theory, psychosocial theory, resilience and strength based approaches, human capital theory, social capital theory, and social cohesion theory. The inclusion of these theories and approaches reflects the notion that “concepts organise experience ... one hallmark of human cognition is that we organize experience *flexibly* – at different levels of abstraction ... [and that] concepts are generally understood to be the building blocks of ideas” (Damon & Lerner, 2008, p. 2980). Each of these theories and approaches has been described in

more detail below, along with an indication as to where they fit within the ecological framework. Chapter Seven explores the connections between them and the research findings.

## Social cognitive theory

*“Social cognitive theory embraces an interactional model of causation in which environmental events, personal factors, and behaviour all operate as interacting determinants’ of each other.”*

( Bandura, 1986, p. xi)

Bandura (1986) was renowned for his social cognitive theory which argues that a person’s self-belief in their capabilities is central to influencing how that person behaves (Pajares, 1996, p. 543). Thus, this self belief enables a person to “produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it” (Bandura, 1986, p. 395). As Benard and Marshall (1997) have proposed, “we are all born with the innate ability to transform the way we experience life with our own thinking” (cited in Pranksky & McMillen, 2009, p. 247).

Judge and Hurst (2007) have explored the phenomenon whereby people from the same socio-cultural circumstances have not experienced the same levels of success. This phenomenon was explored by evaluating data collected from a National Longitudinal Survey of Youth which began in America in 1979. This survey (which covered a myriad of factors) interviewed 12,686 men and woman aged between 14 and 22 years, and then re-interviewed this same group of people annually for 15 years (until 1994) after which they were interviewed biennially. Most (over 80%) of the interviews were done in person, the rest were done over the phone. Judge and Hurst (2007) evaluated the data in order to explore “why some people with certain opportunities and circumstances linked to success flourish whereas others with the same advantages do less well and, at times, even founder” (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1212). Or, to put it another way, “children of disadvantage are not expected to do well in life, and yet we find that a surprising number do prosper in adulthood” (Bandura (ed.), 1995, p. 53). While acknowledging the hurdles experienced by those from disadvantaged groups, Judge and Hurst (2007)

found that one identifiable reason for different outcomes from the same circumstances related to a person's core self-concept ( p. 1222). They go on to say

it is surprising how little positive impact socio-economic status has in the presence of low CSE [core self evaluations] in light of popular beliefs. Even more surprising, however, are the interactive effects of CSE with academic achievement [which is] the most highly touted and widely supported route to wealth. Yet, results of this study reveal that the incomes of similarly credentialed individuals may vary considerably because of differences in self-concept (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1223).

To explain (in part) this phenomenon Langston proposed the concept of 'capitalization' whereby people's operationalisation of events impacts on how they perceive that event. He suggested that "self-concept plays an important role in defining individuals' responses to beneficial experiences and, as a result, the rewards they reap" (cited in Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1212). This argument can be used for all experiences (not just the beneficial ones), and has some common elements with the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2006; Bandura, 1986; Saleeby, 1997, p. 62) whereby a person's cognitive analysis influences their perception of events. As Pajares (1996) commented, how "individuals interpret the results of their performance attainments informs and alters their environments and their self-beliefs, which in turn inform and alter their subsequent performances" ( p. 544) .

Judge and Hurst (2008) found that within the context of employment, "people with high core self-evaluations [including, one can assume, self-confidence] tend to be better performers, are more satisfied in their work, are better able to recover from job loss, and are happier in life" (p. 858). Through capitalising on the good and the positive experiences and opportunities (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1214) people were able to gain cumulative advantages via higher education, steeper career growth, higher income, and better overall health (Judge & Hurst, 2008, p. 858). After reviewing their research, Lyubomirsky et al (2005) argued that positive emotions (assuming this includes self-confidence) "lead people to think, feel, and act in ways that promote both resource building and involvement" (p. 804, cited in Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1213). With regards to effective social work intervention, Pransky and McMillen (2009) assert that "people's greatest strength is their ability to use the power of thought wisely. People need only to truly understand how thought and wisdom work within them to give them

the experience of life they want for themselves” (p. 251). Pransky and McMillen (2009, p. 247) refer to studies undertaken by Bandura which suggested that the most consistent indicator of short or long term success was self-efficacy.

In recent years sociologists have argued that human emotion pervades all aspects of society, and provides a “crucial link between micro and macro levels of social reality” (Turner & Stets, 2005, p. 1). How young adults feel about themselves impacted on their relationships with others (Cobb, 2007, p. 249), and both their perception of, and their interaction with, the world around them (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1212). It is not difficult to imagine that a self-confident young adult is more likely to challenge perceived injustices, intervene in unhealthy situations, act as an advocate, and generally contribute wholesomely to their families, communities, and the wider society. Or to look at it from another perspective

one of the dangers of telling people that they are no good, that they are indeed a threat to society and that their religion is violent and worthless, is that eventually they may begin to embrace the hatred swirling around them and send it right back, even passing it on to their children in some cases (Deen, 2003, p. 285).

Social cognitive processes are located at the microsystem level of the ecological framework. Aspects like a positive self-regard, a belief in one’s own abilities, a perception that challenges provided opportunities to learn (as compared to being obstacles to avoid) are all examples of social cognitive processes. Chapter Seven explores the connections between social cognitive processes and the research findings.

## Developmental based psychosocial theory

During the 1960s Erik Erickson proposed a developmental based psychosocial theory that encompassed the entire lifespan (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007). In this linear developmental model a healthy and systematic progression through all of the stages is required before an adult can achieve rounded wellbeing (Berk, 2005). Each stage “is characterized by two opposing poles, reflecting crises, or choices to be made across the lifespan. One pole or possible response option ensures positive emotional development, while the other hinders such growth” (Heaven, 2001, p. 27). The developmental stages

from childhood to early adulthood include trust versus mistrust (birth to 1 year); autonomy versus shame and doubt (1 to 3 years); initiative versus guilt (3 to 5 years); industry versus inferiority (5 to 12 years); identity versus identity confusion (adolescence); intimacy versus isolation (young adulthood) (Heaven, 2001); generativity versus stagnation (middle adulthood) and ego integrity versus despair (late adulthood) (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 20). This developmental theory proposes that young adults who have grown up learning to distrust have difficulty locating ideals in which they can have faith, young adults who have little initiative do not explore opportunities, and young adults with little industry have difficulty locating meaningful vocations that match their skills and interests (Berk, 2005, p. 586). “The ways in which each stage is confronted and resolved (or not) has profound effects on subsequent stages. This is especially true for Erickson’s fifth stage, identity [versus] role confusion, the one most closely associated with adolescence” (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 20). Cobb (2007) believed that “adolescents with high ideal self-images are better adjusted: They are more reflective, do better in school, tolerate frustration better, and are more resilient to stress” (p. 249). Heaven (2001) suggested that adolescents with a healthy self-identity are more confident in that they are “more self-assured and not self-conscious ... [and are] unlikely to be anxious or embarrassed should they be the focus of attention” (p. 39). Peer groups’ play a vital role in adolescents achieving a positive self identity, along with a sense of belonging, and overall psychological health (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007). “The peer group is a source of self-esteem and help build one’s reputation. It facilitates the achievement of identity and is also a source of companionship, since it help avoid loneliness” (Heaven, 2001, p. 85). Young adults look to their peer group (including social cliques, and intimate friendships) to assist them with this identity formation. They listen, observe, experiment, bounce ideas off each other, all of which contribute to the development of self-identity as they compare and contrast themselves with others. While peer groups comprise people who are the same age and who are known to the young adult, it is the social clique which provides the more intimate friendships. Within this more intimate arena (which requires mutual loyalty and trust) more personal sharing occurs (Heaven, 2001, p. 86). Using Erickson’s stages of development, particularly with regards to building a healthy sense of identity during adolescence, “forming satisfying relationships with close friends and one’s peer group is an important developmental task of adolescence which also has implications



for the successful completion of one's life tasks and one's emotional adjustment" (Heaven, 2001, p. 79), although

having close friends, even if only a few, is better than being popular. The latter, although not to be slighted, may make adolescents feel socially competent, but it does not contribute to self-esteem ... Friends [on the other hand] ... affirm adolescents' sense of self (Cobb, 2007, p. 249).

It has been well argued that the 'family' remains the core place of belonging, from which the wellbeing of young people is generated (McCreanor, Watson & Denny, 2006, p. 156; Lauzière, 2006, p. 33). A supportive, warm, predictable, and approving family environment is as crucial to the development of a positive sense of self in adolescence as it is in childhood (Berk, 2005, p. 588). When the family is hostile, negative, or inconsistent in its support, young people can "feel, at best, uncertain of their capacities and, at worst, incompetent and unloved ... their self-worth fluctuates ... [and many] rely heavily on peers rather than adults to affirm their self-esteem" (Berk, 2005, p. 589). The attachment between a young person and their family has been identified in literature as being central not only with regards to building self-esteem and confidence, but also with regards to protection from problematic psychological and physical outcomes (McCreanor, Watson & Denny, 2006, p. 157). Along with this, "family background is widely recognised as the single most important contributor to success at school. It can explain much of the variation in educational outcomes, including school achievement and drop out behaviour" (Coutts, 2007, p. 61).

Erickson's developmental based psychosocial theory has highlighted identity versus identity confusion as the key developmental task of adolescence. Family, friendships and peer group (which are components located in the microsystem and the mesosystem) have been discussed as key factors in the development of identity. Connections between the development based psychosocial theory and the research findings are discussed in Chapter Seven.

## Resilience/strength based perspectives

*“There can be no greater strength than the strength that exists automatically and naturally within each and every human being.”*

(Jack Pransky, cited in Pransky & McMillan, 2009, p. 240).

The resilience based perspective led to a change in research focus from “identifying those factors which place children ‘at risk’, to exploration of those factors which serve to protect children who could be considered at risk of developing some type of disorder. A risk factor may be biological, developmental, or socio-economic” (Atwool, 1998, p. 155). Atwool identified three factors that she proposed were responsible for determining those young people who survived (perhaps even thrived) in the face of adversity, namely “individual characteristics, especially competence and self-esteem; supportive family; [and] availability of support in the wider environment, especially the availability of positive role models (Atwool, 1998, p. 156). While confidence, per se, is seldom discussed within the debates on resilience, it would be reasonable to assume it is a component part of broader concepts used like self efficacy and self-esteem.

Ungar (2008) linked the ecological framework to resilience when he observed that with the advent of research on resilience, we came to understand that people’s physical and social ecologies were also responsible for their capacity to overcome the same adversity that predisposed them to breakdown and disorder (p. 17).

Benard and Truebridge (2009) noted that resilience was not a permanent state, nor was it a linear process, rather “resilience is an adaptive process that can fluctuate depending upon one’s changing life circumstances” (p. 208). As researchers, Sanders and Munford (2008) explored

family, school, and community – three of the primary systems in young people’s worlds – in an effort to identify those aspects that contribute most to the development of resilience. The consensus seems to be that caring, support, high

expectations, participation, and involvement in each of these systems all make a difference to successful youth outcomes. One of the most frequently cited findings is that positive relationships have a more profound impact on outcomes than do specific risk factors. In particular, caring and support appear to be the most critical” (p. 356).

Garbarino (2005) cautioned that resilience is not necessarily connected to moral superiority. A young adult who

demonstrates resilience has extraordinary attributes and resources that the non-resilient child does not have. Being unable to protect oneself against the accumulation of risk factors does not constitute moral turpitude. Some environments are too much for anyone (p. xiii).

The caution here relates to those who have used the concept of resilience as a platform from which they blame those who ‘fail’ for their own demise, which is a sentiment often produced as a detraction from oppressive and unjust situations.

The discourse of resilience can be (has been?) co-opted by proponents of a neo-conservative agenda that argues if one person can survive and thrive, then shouldn’t the responsibility for success be on all individuals within populations at risk to do likewise? ... Are services really needed, or should people themselves be expected to follow the lead of the ‘invulnerables’ and surmount their difficult life circumstances? It is a familiar twist on the ‘anyone can be president’ myth. It denies the very real structural constraints on children’s lives. Not all children have the constellation of capacities to succeed (Ungar, 2005, p. xv).

A strength based approach to social work practice has an empowering and enabling focus. This approach explores and identifies the assets, competencies, capabilities, capacities and strengths of the individual (along with their family and community) in order to locate possibilities, rather than exploring the limitations, the dysfunctional, the constraints and the weaknesses (Saleebey 2002; Saleebey 2009; Anderson, Cowger & Snively, 2009, p. 184). The strengths based approach acknowledges that each person (family / community) has their own solution unique to them, and that each person (family / community) is not only capable of locating these solutions, but ought to be enabled to do so (Barwick, 2004, p. 11). Although the strength based approach is

grounded in resilience research (Benard & Truebridge, 2009, p. 202), there is a key difference in that resiliency focuses on ‘protective factors’ for those who are considered ‘at risk’. It has been argued that to some degree this is just a re-packaging of the old deficit-based terminology which “perpetuates the idea of youth as victims, not competent individuals who can make good choices for themselves, their families, and their communities” (Anderson, Cowger and Snively, 2009, p. 184).

Both the resilience and the strength based analysis can be located within all components of the ecological framework since ‘risk’ and ‘strength’ are multi-dimensional. Chapter Seven makes some connections between resilience and strength based approaches, and the research findings.

## Human capital theory

Drawing from the notion of economic capital, human capital relates to the value attached to individual skills and attributes (Mackay, 2003, p. 107). These can be identified through things like educational attainment, innate capabilities (for example sporting prowess, musical and artistic competence) or even physical beauty (as defined within the context of the wider community).

Human capital theory can be located within all components of the ecological framework, in that it not only relates to innate ability, but also to the value placed on that ability by the wider community, and within that time in history. For example, shooting is much more valued in times of war (assuming guns were available) and for hunting food, than it is for a city living vegetarian in a time of peace.

Three indicators of human capital were of particular interest to this study. The first was the research participants perception of the impact that innate ability had on ‘confidence’ and ‘building confidence’. The second was what Judge and Hurst (2007, p. 1212) called ‘capitalisation’ whereby individuals were able to capture benefits beyond those conferred by an event in its own right. Their research suggested that “self-concept plays an important role in defining individual’s responses to beneficial experiences and, as a result, the rewards they reap” (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p. 1212). A classic example of this would be the person who was willing and able to mingle in a social setting (for example, a music festival, an inter school event, or a community festival) and pro-actively network for contacts which could lead to unexpected opportunities. The third

aspect of human capital related to the impact that success had on confidence (and vice versa), from the perspective of the research participants. The human capital theory is connected to the research findings in Chapter Seven.

## Social capital theory

*“Well-being, te oranga, is dependent on the terms under which people participate in society and on the confidence with which they can access good health services, the school of their choice, sport and recreation, a meaningful job, or, most importantly an adequate household income”*

(Durie, 2003, p. 151).

As a further extension of ‘economic’ and ‘human capital’, ‘social capital’ denotes “the value that resides in social relationships. According to social capital theory people make ‘investments’ in relationships with others, which acquire a certain value that can be drawn on. For example ... support and assistance in time of need” (Mackay, 2003, p.107). The OECD (2001) has defined social capital as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation amongst groups” (cited in Spoonley et al, 2005, p. 93). Bruhn (2005, p. 2189) highlighted that the importance of family based social capital becomes clear when we reflect on those people who have minimal family based social capital, for example, refugees. “The research points to the family as one of the primary sites through which resources are mobilized and from which access to qualifications, labour market networks and job search resources is negotiated” (Higgins, 2002, p. 55). Along with families (and extended families), social capital includes other communities in which people belong, including schools, places of employment, friendship and peer groups, neighbourhoods, sporting and cultural communities.

It is not difficult to imagine that ‘social capital’ (including indicators like the social status of families and social networks, cultural knowledge and language, access to economic (and other) resources, educational opportunities, knowledge of choices, and

knowledge of how society and institutions operate) has a significant impact as a foundational starting point for young adults' (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003, p. 344; Nash, 1997, p. 72). In Chapter Seven connections have been made between some of the indicators of the social capital theory mentioned above, and the research findings. Social capital can be located across all the layers of the ecological framework for much the same reasons discussed for the human capital theory, in that the value placed on its component parts is contextually based.

## Social cohesion theory

*“There is a danger if we live in communities that are forever shedding old skins and making – one can’t even call it ‘growing’- new ones; forever pulling down old houses and old buildings, and then even more rapidly pulling down the new ones too, ... that an increasing number of our citizens will grow up rootless, feeling emotionally insecure, in spite of the fact that they may be financially secure. And if the emotional and financial insecurity coincide, the social cocktail is a lethal one. The end point of such a process is that people will feel little commitment or loyalty to the places in which they live and the people among whom they live.”*

(King, 2001, p. 125)

Social capital contributes to social cohesion, in that communities with strongly intertwined and supportive networks who share a common vision are more likely to be able to achieve a cohesive society (Spoonley et al, 2005, p. 93). Social cohesion is not something that can be taken for granted, but rather is a desired outcome proactively aimed for by policy makers and others (Spoonley et al, 2005, p. 85). A society which has strong social cohesion can be identified “as one where all groups have a sense of ‘belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy’” (Jenson, 1998, cited in Spoonley et al, 2005, p. 88). This state of being is not static, as community shared values, norms and beliefs continually require reinforcement and re-affirmation in order for the social cohesion to be maintained (Bruhn, 2005, p. 208).

Communities do not have to be homogeneous in order to be cohesive, but they do require a sense of being valued, and a sense of having some responsibility for the wellbeing of others, as these contribute to the sense of reciprocity and trust (Bruhn, 2005, p. 210). Another key ingredient “to create social cohesion is stability. If a community has a continual in-flow and out-flow of residents it is not possible for the interpersonal seeds of social cohesion to take root. Therefore, significant continuous social change is an enemy of social cohesion” (Bruhn, 2005, p. 206). Interestingly “in 2006 more than half (57.7 percent) of the total usually resident population [in New Zealand] had changed their usual residence at least once in the previous five years, and almost 1 in 4 people (24.8 percent) had moved within the past year” (Statistics New Zealand, 2007, p. 2). Saville-Smith and James (2003) noted that a Christchurch based Child Development Study found residential mobility was a strong predictor of risk amongst young people (p. 3).

According to Bruhn (2005, p. 206) a strong sense of social cohesion in a community is not only supportive, but also provides a safety net for its members. In socially cohesive communities young adults can take risks and explore new possibilities in the belief that they will be supported, encouraged, protected, and rescued (should that be required). Connections between indicators of social cohesion (namely support, encouragement, and protection) and the research findings have been made in Chapter Seven. Social cohesion is primarily located at the microsystem and mesosystem layers, although undoubtedly all the other layers of the ecological framework have an impact.

This chapter has outlined the theoretical frameworks which have provided insight and guidance to this research journey. The next chapter makes explicit three cultural based contexts that have relevance to this study, namely ‘youth’, ‘school’, and ‘Māori’. The reason behind exploring these particular cultural contexts is discussed further in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

# Cultural Contexts

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### Introduction

Culture has been defined as “a set of traditional, explicit and implicit beliefs, values, actions, and material environments that are transmitted by language, symbol, and behaviour in an enduring and interacting group of people” (Saarni, Campos, Camras & Witherington, 2008, p. 366). Culture has been identified as a foundational and fundamental ingredient within all societies in that communities are based on, and built from, cultural attitudes, beliefs and values (Hook, 2006, p. 8). As such, cultural considerations are integral to all social science research.

The concept of culture has been used in several contexts, and can be used in more than one context at any one time. For example, a Pākeha high school student would belong to at least three cultural groupings, including age related (e.g., youth culture), organisational related (e.g., high school culture), and ethnicity related (e.g., Pākeha culture). To these three cultural contexts it would not be difficult to add citizenship (e.g., New Zealand nationalistic culture), gender (e.g., macho culture), location (e.g., Auckland culture), spiritual beliefs (e.g., Catholic culture) and sport (e.g., the culture of rugby). On reflection, I doubt that it is actually possible to belong to only one cultural group, although people may place higher significance on some of their cultural groupings than others. For example, some people place ethnicity central to their cultural identity (Callister, Didham, & Kivi, 2009, p. 5), while others might place their employment as central to their cultural identity (e.g., a soldier in the New Zealand Army).

While more than one cultural context can usually be identified for any person at any one time, cultural components (like beliefs, values, language and behaviour) are not necessarily compatible across cultural contexts. When cultural components are



compatible, they often form part of the implicit assumptions regarding the 'norm' of that community. For example, in New Zealand society there is a generally held belief (reinforced through marriage law) that only monogamous relationships are ethically acceptable. This is in contrast to other parts of the world where it is considered ethically acceptable (also reinforced through laws) that one man may have multiple wives. It is when cultural components are incompatible that tensions, conflicts, and oppression/domination can occur. This becomes more likely when the diverse cultural components overlap within the same community. In her book titled '*Caravanserai – Journey Among Australian Muslims*', Deen (2003) managed to capture this complexity in the following story shared by Asma, one of her research participants.

'When I pass through Malaysia, the Muslims there always ask me when I converted. Next in line come the Anglo feminists. They don't see me as a Muslim woman at all, so they debate with me in a way that they wouldn't do with a woman wearing *hijab*. They are frank and open but we always seem to disagree, and I don't see any positives flowing from these debates. And of course, mainstream Australia only sees the Chinese in me – not the Muslim! Early on it was a problem because you never knew where you fitted in. You juggled your identities on a day-to-day basis. Some you can put to sleep for the moment but never the Chinese side, of which I am tremendously proud'. Confident and comfortable as she now was with her multiple identities, Asma told me that once, when very young and travelling with her family from Pakistan to Australia, 'We did a slight detour to visit my mother's relatives in Taiwan. The Taiwanese Muslims knew that I wasn't exactly like them, and when they asked me where I came from I told them I was Pakistani. They just laughed. There I was so visibly Chinese with them, and claiming to be a Pakistani!'. As she grew older, she gradually overcame the yearning to belong. But not before going through that Pakistani phase, and then the desire to be Chinese Chinese instead of Chinese Muslim. 'Sometimes it is very hurtful not fitting in anywhere. I think I've stopped looking for answers. There are none; I just have to bear with it. My family is home for me, and by that I mean wherever my parents are – that's my home'. Being married has only underlined Asma's outsider status. She had some Chinese friends who disapproved of her marrying

a non-Chinese, and Muslim friends who condemned her for marrying a non-Muslim, and feminist friends who disagreed with her marrying at all!

(Deen, 2003: p. 254)

While the above quote is quite long, it clearly illustrates not only that one person can belong to multiple cultural contexts, but that each context has its own interacting dynamic. These dynamics include assumptions and stereotypes that contribute to the continuum of acceptance and belonging as an insider, rejection and belonging as an outsider, and the myriad of locations in-between. The two cultural contexts that all of the participants in this study have in common is ‘youth culture’ (being Year 13 students) and ‘school culture’ (being students at a high school). Hence, ‘youth’ and ‘school’ culture will be further explored below. I have also discussed ethnicity based culture, and in particular, the ethnicity of Māori. The first reason for this relates to the argument that “for teenagers who are members of ethnic minorities, ethnic identity – a sense of ethnic group membership and attitudes and feelings associated with that membership – is central to the quest for identity” (Berk, 2005, p. 593). The second reason relates to the reality that Māori are indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand, the context within which this research is based. In light of our history of colonial imperialism, assimilation, and oppression, it is essential that the voice of Māori is clearly identified and stated in its own right, as compared to being submerged amongst the dominant viewpoints.

## Youth

The notion of adolescents’ being a distinct ‘group’ with their own ‘culture’ originates from western researchers and theorists primarily from a sociological frame of reference (Wulff, 1995, p. 2) during the early twentieth century (Wyn & Harris; 2004, p. 274). Today it is recognised that ‘adolescence’, along with ‘adolescent culture’ are, of themselves, cultural constructs proposed from the western (constructionist) viewpoint, and within a historical epoch (Arnett, 2002, p. 308; James, 1995, p. 45), as compared to an objective reality (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. xi). As Bradford Brown and Larson (2002) highlighted :

One can learn a lot about the nature of adolescence in a given culture simply by the way it is defined. In some cases there is simply no term to describe adolescence, a certain sign that the society does not regard it as a distinct and important stage of the life cycle.

(p. 2)

As a western construct 'youth culture' has been identified as a time of leisure characterised by delayed responsibility and hedonism, and having distinctive styles of language, dress, and adornment (Arnett, 2002, p. 308). Arnett (2002) continued by commenting that enough youth are involved in the 'youth culture' to make it distinct and identifiable in its own right, and viewed by wider society as "a time of experimental leisure and playful violation of norms before the standards of adult society are accepted and adult roles are entered" (p. 308).

For many people 'youth culture' has been perceived as problematic, full of angst, trouble, and rebellion in which "young people are often portrayed as a disruptive force and as a source of potential harm to themselves and others" (Arnett, 2002, p. 309). The connection of 'youth' with 'problematic' has undoubtedly impacted on the epistemological approach taken by many researchers (Miles, 2000; Peterson, Balthazard, Waldman & Thatcher, 2008; Taurima, 2007; Bishop, Berryman, Teddy & Cavanagh, 2007), and has been reflected through society as a whole (for example, through news reports that focus on the problematic as compared to the inspirational 'youth'). Having said that, in recent years there has been a conscious shift in research focus away from problematic 'youth' to protective factors for 'youth at risk' (apparent in research around resilience and strength based approaches (Ungar, 2005), and to positive developmental factors for all youth (apparent in youth development research (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 170) ).

Many writers have argued that young people are actively involved in constructing the symbolic forms and meanings of their 'youth culture', and that this very process forms the active task of socialisation into that same 'youth culture' (Wulff, 1995, p. 1; James, 1995, p. 47). This is no different to the socialisation process involved into any cultural grouping, since "people negotiate culture, or rather cultural processes, and are formed

by them to a certain extent. When these cultural processes are formed by young people, we are dealing with youth culture” (Wulff, 1995, p. 6).

## School

Returning to the notion that culture is identified by “a set of traditional, explicit and implicit beliefs, values, actions, and material environments that are transmitted by language, symbol, and behaviour in an enduring and interacting group of people” (Saarni, Campos, Camras & Witherington, 2008, p. 366), it is not hard to assert that a school environment has a unique culture in its own right (Coutts, 2007, p.37). “Each school has its own historical, cultural and physical contexts, despite national education policies and similar economic and political conditions” (Coutts, 2007, p. 182). For example, schools are nestled within communities with varying resources, ethnicities, socio-economic factors, urban or rural locations and climatic conditions. The students at schools’ are drawn from these communities, and thus bring with them these influences. Along with this each school has cultural components unique to that school. Some examples of this include the school’s motto and song, internal power dynamics’ amongst and between the staff, the parents’ and the students’, dress code and school uniform, expectations in things like behaviour and performance (explicit and implicit), and sporting and cultural activities.

## Māori

*“If we as an indigenous people can achieve attitudes of self-confidence with expectations of success, while at the same time retain our basic philosophies of aroha and manaakitanga then we will maintain our identity and be the stronger for it. The end result will be economic prosperity for Māori”*

(Hook, 2006, p. 9).

While Māori writers have been consulted throughout this research journey, in recognition of the tangata whenua status of Māori in Aoetearoa / New Zealand only Māori writers have been consulted in this part of the literature review in an endeavour to locate a Māori perspective on building confidence. Having said that, I recognise that as a Pākehā woman my perception and interpretation continually filters any information I receive. This inevitably impacts on what I read, how I interpret what I read, and how I present what I have read in this research report.

It is recognised that Māori viewpoints are not necessarily homogeneous (Edwards, 2003, p. 120) and that variations may well exist between iwi, hāpu and whānau. However, the Māori writers consulted for the discussion below share the experience of ‘success’ (in that they have all had their writings published) and have been ‘confident’ enough to put their viewpoint forward. Those consulted have included Ian Creed Cormack (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Māmoe, Waitaha); Aroha Durie (Ngāti Porou, Kāi Tahu, Rongowhakaata), Mason Durie (Rangitāne, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Raukawa), G. Raumati Hook (Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Toa, Te Atiawa), Mārie McCarthy (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Arawa), Arapera Royal Tangaere (Te Arawa, Ngāti Raukawa, Kāi Tahu), Iranui Te Aonohori Haig (Whānau – a – Ruataupare), Teresa Taurima (Ngāti Kahungunu, Kāi Tahu), Adrienne Ormond, and William John Werahiko Edwards.

Many indigenous writers, including Māori (Durie, 1994; Durie, 1997; Hook, 2006; Hook, 2007; Te Aonohori Haig, 1997) have consistently claimed that a sense of belonging (both geographically and genealogically), and knowledge of one’s own cultural framework (including language, beliefs and values, myths and legends, and traditional practices) are fundamental to a sense of cultural identity, and thus the building of confidence. “In the Māori world one’s personality does not develop in isolation. The family setting is not the only environment within which learning takes place. The child is immersed in the context of cultural values” (Tangaere, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 55). Knowledge of Māori language (te reo) in particular has been identified as an essential ingredient when nurturing confidence. As Kuia Iranui Te Aonohori Haig observed

I have seen it with the little ones. When we push our children to learn their own language, they’ve got two legs to stand on. They can back up what they do, and

what they want to say. Make them strong. It gives them confidence in themselves, which is good because some of those Māori children have got no confidence, they don't even know their own language (Te Aonohoriu Haig, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 44).

Hook (2006), as a Māori academic and education specialist, specifically links language and confidence when he wrote that the “loss of culture including language ... has left many Māori without firm foundations leading to a loss of confidence” (Hook, 2006, p.2).

As a historically collectivist culture (Aroha Durie, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 149) Māori wellbeing depends on “the principles of obligation and reciprocity, which are central to the whānau concept of co-operation” (McCarthy cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 27). From this perspective the wellbeing and confidence (or lack of) of a young person is “taken as a comment on the whole group, either the immediate family or the more extended whānau and even hapū” (Durie, 1998, p. 15). Thus, the incentive for building confidence is not so much connected to individual success (as it might be for Pākehā) as it is to whānau wellbeing, since it is “through the development of self-esteem and confidence, the child is able to love and care for the whānau, hapū and iwi (mana tangata)” (Tangaere, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 56). This indigenous collectivist approach remains central for young Māori today.

Even in modern times a sense of personal identity derives as much if not more from family characteristics than from occupation or place of residence. Interest in family and tribal background rivals personal qualifications or achievements so that credibility, certainly in Māori settings, depends on an individual being able to make the links and demonstrate that there is active whānau and tribal support (Durie, 1998, p. 72).

When placing this collectivist approach within a school setting it has been argued that “cooperative learning techniques alongside an emphasis on building positive classroom relationships has produced students that are confident, engaged and successful” (Taurima, 2007, p. 3).

According to Durie (1998) the school environment, along with other environmental factors like housing, employment, health, and income, all have an impact on the well

being (including confidence) of Māori. Durie (1998) summarised this in his Te Whare Tapa Wha Model which uses the four walls of a whāre (house) in order to identify well being, with each separate wall symbolising taha tinana (the physical), taha wairua (the spiritual), taha hinengaro (thoughts and feelings), and taha whānau (family) (Durie, 1998, p. 69). According to Durie (1998) the four walls provide symmetry and strength, while also being relational and multi-dimensional to each other. In order to achieve holistic wellbeing all four walls require consideration, and weakness in one wall impacts on the overall whāre (house).

According to Hook education not only serves the needs of the individual, but also those of the wider community in the hope that it will create good citizens who will advance economic development while preserving society as a whole (Hook, 2007, pp. 2-3). However, while “there are many similarities between Māori and Pākeha” (Hook, 2006, p. 9), mainstream education is based on the Pākeha world view resulting in the imposition of Pākeha interests and values onto Māori “with the hope, and perhaps expectation that Māori will conform” (Hook, 2007, p. 1). This cultural domination, along with the cultural denigration of Māori “underlies many of the social ills common to those colonized by Europeans” (Hook, 2006, p. 2). Not only have young Māori had to learn how to survive within two cultural communities (Māori and Pākeha), the difficulties in balancing two world views (which are not always compatible) can be debilitating and has significantly contributed to a reduction in overall wellbeing, including a reduction of confidence experienced by many young Māori (Hook, 2006; Hook, 2007; Durie, 1998).

A collectivist approach relevant for Māori within a school setting uses the strategies of encouraging, supporting, and nurturing students at all levels, and throughout the whole school community. This, of itself, significantly contributes to the building of students self-confidence, along with their sense of identity (Hook, 2007, p. 10). Within this community Māori social dynamics dominate, whereby individuals are encouraged to cooperate within the group context, while competing across groups “Māori children generally work best as individuals when they know they are part of a group which in turn is part of a larger group. This gives them the security and confidence to perform to the best of their ability” (Cormack, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, p. 163). Cormack continues by revealing that

Without this secure hāpu and iwi base in the classroom it is unlikely that many Māori students will want to share their knowledge in class for fear of disapproval from their peers. Peer pressure not to achieve is often an indication that classroom working routines which promote achievement by Māori students have not been established (Cormack, cited in Te Whāiti et al., 1997, pp. 165-166).

Ormond (2004) has researched this notion of young Māori not sharing their knowledge, and argued that this was particularly likely in the presence of the dominant Pākeha social group (p. 118). Ormond (2004) referred to this behaviour as whākama, whereby the young adults “became afraid, lost confidence, were hesitant to speak, and chose to oppressively silence their voices to protect themselves” (p. 118). According to Ormond (2004, p. 119) this self-imposed silence was not just an indicator of confidence levels as it is also apparent when young people experienced success, since sharing stories of individual success was considered showing off in front of others. Another reason identified by Ormond (2004, p. 144) for not speaking out related to the position a young adult has in their family. It is the older siblings, older relatives, and those with status (mana) who has the cultural permission to speak out.

This chapter began by introducing the relevance that cultural contexts have in relation to this research project. Following this introduction three specific cultural contexts, namely ‘youth’, ‘school’, and ‘Māori’ were discussed. ‘Youth’ and ‘school’ were chosen because this study took place within these cultural based settings. ‘Māori’ was chosen because this study took place within Aotearoa / New Zealand, and as such it was important that the indigenous perspective was not completely immersed within the dominant ethnic based framework of Pākeha. This chapter provided some cultural based insights which informed the research methodology and the research design, both of which are outlined in the next chapter. Also in the next chapter are the ethical considerations reflected upon throughout this research journey.



# Chapter Five

## Research Methodology, Research Design, and Ethical Considerations

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### Introduction

*“All philosophical positions and their attendant methodologies, explicitly or implicitly, hold a view about social reality. This view, in turn, will determine what can be regarded as legitimate knowledge. Thus, the ontological shapes the epistemological”*

*(Williams and May, 1996, p. 69)*

This study originated from the researcher’s genuine curiosity around ‘confidence’ and the ‘building of confidence’ from a successful young adults perspective. Having said that, I was cognisant that my understanding of ontology and epistemology influences all of my work, since “the starting point for knowing reality is our ontological connection with reality” (Williams & May, 1996, p. 72). While there remains ongoing debate and dissent amongst social scientists with regards to the epistemological, ontological, and technical frameworks that underpin research (Pawson, 1999, p. 23), the discussion below outlines the philosophical drivers that have underpinned and influenced this particular research journey.

This chapter begins with identifying and discussing the underlying principles (epistemology), and the philosophical beliefs regarding the nature of the social world (ontology) that have influenced the shape of this research. After these foundational factors have been made explicit the research context is described, followed by a discussion on the third component of research methodology, namely the practical research techniques and methods that have been applied to this research, otherwise known as the method (Pawson, 1999, p. 21). This chapter concludes with a discussion on some of the ethical considerations that have informed and guided this study.

## Qualitative

While quantitative and qualitative approaches to research can both provide valuable data (Craig, 2003, p. 14), it is qualitative methodologies that see knowledge and experience as being subjective, influenced both by constructivism and interpretivism (O’Leary, 2005). This study assumed that young adults hold the legitimate knowledge to their ‘confidence’, and the ‘building of their confidence’, hence data was collected directly from them by using the qualitative technique of focus group discussions. These discussions used a reflexive process which encouraged the participating young adults to delve more deeply into meanings and interpretations, and, as a part of this process, actually supported the construction of meaning. Their interactive discussion encouraged participants to hear (and share) each other’s reflections and revelations, thus providing an opportunity to not only identify differences, but also commonalities and shared understandings (Walliman, 2005, p. 188; Pawson, 1999, p. 23; O’Leary, 2005, p. 118; Kitzinger, 1994) as they endeavoured to make sense of their experiences (Craig, 2003; p .6).

While identity development and self-construction are sometimes viewed as individual endeavours, they are thoroughly interpersonal or interrelational processes. We do not construct our life stories on our own. We are, rather, in a constant state of co creating who we are with the people with whom we are in closest connection and within those contexts that hold the most meaning for our day-to-day existence (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 6).

## Ethnographic

The positioning with regards to the essential nature of the world embedded within this research (in other words, the ontology) and the underlying principles that have informed this study with regards to what is considered to be knowledge (in other words, the epistemology) have been influenced by the philosophical beliefs that underpin the ethnographic framework. The ethnographic approach comes from the position that “all social action is intentional. Understanding social behaviour is therefore a matter of deciphering the reasoning that underlies action. Social life revolves around shared meanings which are created in processes of social interaction” (Pawson, 1999, p. 23). The ethnographic approach requires that research imitates real life and becomes involved in interactions that formulate everyday meanings in an attempt to “understand, discover, describe, and interpret a way of life from the point of view of its participants” (O’Leary, 2005, p. 118). While this research study is not a case study, it is based within the research participants real life context (namely, their high school, and within their school based peer group), and involves interactive dialogue amongst the research participants as they explore shared meanings and interpretations of ‘confidence’ and the ‘building of confidence’. The ethnographic influence is evident in this research study in the data collection techniques (including the qualitative method of focus group discussions which is discussed further below) which, to some degree placed the researcher “closer to the lived reality of those being studied” (Pawson, 25, p. 25). Interestingly, the influence of this philosophical positioning is also apparent in the operational definition of ‘success’ applied in this research, namely ‘success’ as experienced by the participants within their school context.

## Interpretivist and Constructivist

This research study has been informed by the interpretivist and constructivist ontologies and epistemologies that “sees social reality characterized by intersubjectivity and common meanings which need to be interpreted and understood” (Walliman, 2005, p.188). Using this approach

constructivists seek to build a picture of the world from the ‘inside’; from the view of the researched. For them, human research of any form is a *subjective* enterprise, as the social world can only be fully appreciated from the viewpoint

of the individual ... with an end goal of producing information which tells a story from the participants' perspective, and which has meaning for them and others (Gauld, 2001, p. 117).

The challenge here is that I, as the researcher, did not come to this project as a neutral observer, hence it is not only the research participants who are providing and constructing interpretations and meanings. As the writer of the research report I am also interpreting and constructing from my own frame of reference (Walliman, 2005, p.202). Making this explicit does not devalue this research, but rather informs the reader of some of the influences, from which they themselves will be interpreting and constructing their own meanings.

## Insider / Outsider

Inextricably linked to the interpretivist and constructivist approaches is the 'insider epistemology' which essentially relates to whether the researcher is influenced by an 'insider' perspective, or an 'outsider' perspective. As a brief summation the argument here relates to the notion that an 'insider' (belonging to the social network under study) has some enhanced empathy and intuitive understanding, although this belief is challenged with the argument that the perception of the 'insider' may actually get clouded by their emotions, and by the dynamics of the social network under study, of which they are a part. On the other hand an 'outsider' (not belonging to the social network under study) may have the ability to see things with fresh eyes and with some sense of detachment. However, as the counter argument goes, they may miss some of the meaningful intricacies that only an 'insider' would be able to pick up (Fay, B. 1996, p. 9). Along with this is the ethnographic based realisation that "descriptions are necessarily interpretive, and the basis of interpretation is the filtering of observations and inputs through theoretical and analytical frameworks that are, of course, imbued with a researchers' own world view" (O'Leary, 2005, p. 120). In this study the researcher was a mixture of an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. As an older woman I was an outsider with regards to youth and school, but as a resident of the same provincial community within the same country, along with being a current student, I had some elements of 'insider'. Having identified this, I am cognisant of the reality that this insider / outsider position influenced not only the questions I asked, but also the themes

and comments which I choose to notice (Pawson, 1999), and this realisation enhanced the reflexivity applied by me when analysing the data.

## Critical Realism

This research is influenced by a positioning of critical realism, in that the focus of the study is to locate tendencies and patterns within a specific cultural context (namely level 13 students' attending a co-educational state high school in provincial New Zealand) and within a specific point in time (Grace, 1998, p. 115; Walliman, 2005, p. 208). This stance evidences the influence of the ethnographic epistemology, and supports Pawson's (1999) suggestion that ethnographers have conceded "there are multiple realities and their accounts are but one version among many" (p. 32). These philosophical and theoretical foundations are reflected in the way in which the research findings have been presented. More specifically, the findings have not been presented as having varying degrees of 'universal truth', but rather they have been presented as a representation of a variety of meanings, interpretations, and perspectives offered by the research participants as they reflected upon the concepts of 'confidence', and 'building confidence'. Along with this "critical examination of world views, ideology, and power, critical ethnography attempts to conceptualize the current situation in a larger socio-historic framework" (O'Leary, 2005, p. 145) and thus connects to the ecological framework which has informed this study.

Using the critical epistemology approach, it is from research findings that knowledge of social processes can develop. This research design not only collected young adults meanings and interpretations, but also played a part (via the reflexivity apparent in the focus group discussions) in creating shared understandings (Grace, 1998, p.115). An integral part of this reflexive process is an ethno methodological belief that social life is not just "described through language, but is actually created by language" (Williams & May, 1996, p. 77). Thus, through the process of conversation, young adults were not only sharing their meanings, understandings, and interpretations, they were also constructing and refining them.

## Research Design.

### Introduction

The next part of this chapter discusses some of the key components of this research design, including the research context, the sample group, how research participants were selected, the number of research participants involved along with some of their demographic details, some cultural considerations, the use of focus group discussions, data collection, and data analysis. This research design was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee : Southern B (see Appendix Eleven).

### Research context

Around October 2009 the researcher approached four state co-educational high schools located in one provincial part of Aotearoa / New Zealand requesting to carry out a piece of research with Year 13 students attending their school (see page 59 of this report). Two of the four high schools approached agreed to this request. The research data was collected via focus group discussions at the end of 2009 from research participants who were 17 and 18 year old young adults in their final year (Year 13) of high school attendance. In order to minimise the impact of power differentials between the school staff and their senior students (see page 61 of this report) the data was collected during school time in the last week of the school year. Another reason the end of the school year was chosen was in recognition of the busy schedules held by many Year 13 students. Competing demands like study, work, family, friendships, and extra-curricular activities (for example, sport, cultural, and leadership activities) all contributed to a busy year for the Year 13 students. However, by early December all the significant school activities (excluding signing out from the school) had been completed. The research was undertaken on the school premises during school time as the researcher believed a school based venue would be both familiar and accessible to the research participants while being considered a safe environment from their school's perspective. At one high school the focus group discussion was held in a meeting room off the school library, and at the other high school the focus group discussion was held in the school board / meeting room. Both venues were in quiet tucked away places that appeared soundproof to the researcher.

## Sample Group

The sample group for this study was Year 13 students who attended one or other of the two participating co-educational state high schools in one provincial Aotearoa / New Zealand community, and who had been identified as 'successful' within their school context by a school staff member (as the Principal's delegate). Year 13 students were chosen as representative of young adults for the following reasons:

- At the age of 17 and 18 years of age they fitted comfortably within the developmental stage of 'young adult' as discussed in Chapter Two of this report.
- By focusing on Year 13 students within a school context other variables (such as young school leavers, young adults in the work force, young adults in prison, home schooled young adults, unemployed young adults) were minimised.
- The Year 13 students already had some experience of success, in that they had made it to Year 13.
- Year 13 is the last year at high school, therefore these students were the oldest students at their school and as such have had the most time to not only reflect on their life experiences to date, but also to have developed more advanced cognitive skills with which to reflect on the research questions.
- At ages 17 and 18 the Year 13 students were more likely to be able to comprehend issues like consent and confidentiality than the younger students.
- Being over 16 years of age the Year 13 students were able to consent to participate in this research in their own right (as compared to requiring consent from parents/guardians).

With regards to identifying the sample group that fitted the research criteria of 'successful', the operational definition of 'successful' (see page 19 of this report) was used. This being a student who had fulfilled at least one of the following:

- A student who had been given a leadership role at their school in 2009. For example, sports captain, kapa haka leader, prefect, cultural committee member.

- A student who had received an award at their school's end of year Senior Prize Giving ceremony in 2009. For example, an academic award, an award for citizenship, an award for best debater, and / or a sport related award.

It is from the sample group criteria identified above that the research participants were selected following the process outlined below.

## Selecting Research Participants

With regards to selecting participants from within the sample group, a school staff member from each school (nominated as the Principal's delegate) was supplied with copies of an 'Information Sheet' (see Appendix Two), and the 'Prospective Participant' form (see Appendix Four) and given the task of approaching ten potential research participants whom they believed fulfilled the research criteria. These staff members verbally introduced the research to the potential participants, then provided a copy of the 'Information Sheet' (see Appendix Two), and a 'Prospective Participant' form (see Appendix Four) to each potential participant. They invited potential participants to fill in the 'Prospective Participant' form according to their wishes, and to place the completed form in the enclosed box marked 'Research' which was placed on the front desk of their school office. This box was collected by the researcher after a period of about two weeks.

Only those Year 13 students who consented in writing (on their returned 'Prospective Participant' form, see Appendix Four) to being contacted by the researcher were approached, either by phone or email. The purpose of this initial approach was to provide an opportunity for the prospective participant to ask questions, and generally to become more informed about the research. Most of those who were contacted had no questions, and all of them readily agreed to participate in a focus group discussion. A couple who did have a few questions asked about specific factors like when and where we would meet, how long it would take, and who else would be there. While answering the questions about when and where we would meet the researcher did not inform anyone of the identity of the other potential participants. Initially seven young adults from each school consented to participate. However, in one of the schools two students who had been approached by the school staff member, and who had initially marked on their 'Prospective Participant' form (see Appendix Four) that they did not wish to be



contacted eventually became focus group discussion participants. This eventuated because a couple of weeks after completing the 'Prospective Participant' form one of these students texted a close relative of the researcher (who shared the same surname) to see if we were related. Apparently a text conversation then occurred (unbeknown to the researcher) which established what relationship we were to each other. The close relative then approached the researcher to say that they had been texted by a certain person, and that this certain person had lost their 'Prospective Participant' form (see Appendix Four) and wanted another form because they would like to attend the focus group discussion. Since the researcher had not been given permission to contact this person, she informed the close relative that the person concerned could either ask whoever gave them the form in the first instance for another copy, or (since the researcher was already aware that they had been approached by the school staff member) if they preferred, they could turn up on the day and the researcher would have spare copies that could be filled in before the session started. As it transpired this person turned up to the focus group discussion, along with another potential participant who had also initially indicated on their 'Prospective Participant' form that they did not wish to be contacted. These two people filled in a fresh 'Prospective Participant' form and joined the group. Thus, one focus group involved seven young adults, and the other focus group involved nine young adults. What was of interest from a research perspective is that for all the consideration around confidentiality it appeared that several (although not all) of the young adults involved had actually texted each other, and talked with each other, regarding who was going to participate in the focus group discussion. For at least one of the group's this discussion included checking out who the researcher was.

## **Size and demographics of the focus group discussion participants.**

Demographic information of the research participants has been included along with the group sizes in recognition of O'Leary's (2005) warning that "ethnographers need to guard against 'homogenization' that can give minimal recognition to divergence within a particular group" (p.120). The information given below highlights both the common and the diverse demographics that were apparent. Sixteen students participated in this

study, seven in one focus group and nine in another focus group. Of these sixteen young adults six were male and ten were female, five were aged seventeen and eleven were aged eighteen. The self-identified cultures represented included five NZ European, two Pākeha, one Māori / Pākeha, one Māori / New Zealander, two Māori, two New Zealander, one Samoan, one Arabian, and one British. While sharing similar ages (17 and 18 ), similar educational attainments (completing Year 13 at a state co-educational high school), and residing in the same small provincial New Zealand community, emerging from the data it became apparent that a wide range of family shapes were represented (for example, single parent families, re-constituted families, extended families). Along with this were indicators that suggested a wide range of family incomes (for example, family members who were self-employed, professionals, beneficiaries, farm workers, labourers, and entrepreneurs). While each participant's age, gender and ethnicity were explicitly asked for at the beginning of the focus group discussions (see Appendix Eight) the researcher was able to identify indicators around family shapes and incomes from the information provided by the participants within the general context of the focus group discussions.

## Cultural Considerations

This research study pro-actively included a step in the process that required a cultural scan of both the research design and the research methodology. More specifically, this cultural scan related to the relevance, appropriateness, and safety of this research for Māori research participants. The reason for this relates to the reality that Māori are indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand, the context within which this research was based. In light of our history of colonisation it is essential that the perspective of Māori is clearly identified and stated in its own right, as compared to being submerged amongst the dominant viewpoints.

The cultural scan integrated into this research design involved meeting with three cultural advisors, one nominated by the Principal's delegate from one school, and one (who then included a colleague in the discussions) nominated by the Principal's delegate from the other school. All of the cultural advisors were active participants in their school community, so came from within the same school context as the research participants. These meetings occurred on the school premises about a week before the focus group discussions took place. The meetings began with an introduction of the researcher and

the research, along with an overview of the research purpose. The cultural advisors were provided with written information, including the draft of the proposed focus group discussion process and question guideline (see Appendix Eight), and the Information Sheet (see Appendix Two). The first part of the meeting involved a general discussion around the broader research topics of ‘confidence’ and ‘confidence building’ within the school context for all students, and particularly for Māori students. This part of the discussion was led by the cultural advisors. The second part of the discussion was guided by the question guideline for the cultural advisors devised by the researcher (see Appendix One). The whole discussion, with the approval of the cultural advisors, was taped and transcribed, and provided a wealth of extra data for this research study. Highlights of their contribution have been included in Appendix Nine.

## Focus Group Discussions

Focus groups “are group discussions organised to explore a specific set of issues” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 103) and as such provided an appropriate qualitative methodological tool for this ethnographic based research which aimed to explore the meanings and interpretations that young adults gave to ‘confidence’ and ‘building confidence’. The use of open ended questions along with the dynamic and interactive conversations allowed for a more in depth search for relevant data, thus supporting the possibility of a deeper understanding (McCullough, Huebner & Laughlin, 2000; p. 288). It is the interaction between the research participants which distinguishes focus group discussions from one to one interviews (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 103). Having said that using a self-reporting approach, be that in interviews or discussion groups, can have its limitations. Not only did this approach depend on a young person’s ability to recall information, it also depended on that person’s willingness to be open and honest in front of his/her school peer group (Cobb, 2007, p. 460). In this research context fabrications, exaggerations, and exclusions were distinct possibilities as the participants may have been influenced by how they thought they were being perceived by others at their school. Thus, a “disadvantage of self-report data is the possibility of distortion, when subjects deliberately change information ... or when adolescents fail to remember or report events the way they actually occurred” (Cobb, 2007: p. 460). There is no way that the researcher could confidently comment on if, or how much this may have occurred. The focus group discussions did appear congruent and free flowing to the researcher,

and there were times when the participants actually challenged each other with regards to the authenticity and / or distortion of some of their comments. Hence the participants themselves (perhaps precisely because they knew each other) provided some degree of monitoring.

## Data Collection

The two focus group discussions occurred during school time (while the students were at school) and on the school premises. The Principal's delegate organised for an appropriate meeting space to be made available at a specific time, and informed the participating students of this. Before the focus group discussions began a process of welcoming and 'getting prepared' was undertaken. As a part of this stage the researcher brought along some freshly cooked pizzas and drinks to share. While these were being consumed the researcher welcomed everyone, introduced herself, and introduced the research. She asked if everyone knew each other, and at this point it appeared that while everyone knew of each other, some of the young adults were close friends while others knew each other in a more general peer group context. The researcher then invited questions and there was a general conversation regarding the research. General ground rules for the focus group discussion were collectively identified and agreed to, although the researcher ensured that the core ground rules that pertained to ethical considerations were included (see Appendix Eight). The researcher verbally asked for, and received, permission for the focus group discussion to be taped. It was only after the above steps were completed that the participants were asked to complete a 'consent form' (refer Appendix Five). The format outlined above takes into consideration cultural processes of 'greetings, food and relationship building' (Walsh-Tapiata, Metuamate, Rikihana, Webster, Warren & Kiriona, 2006, p. 13; Ormond, 2004, p. 53). Only after all of the above steps had been completed was the tape recorder turned on, and the focus group discussion began.

The researcher used a question guideline to facilitate the discussions (see Appendix Eight). Several open ended questions were used to encourage the sharing of experiences at a more in-depth level, and inclusive strategies were used to enhance a reflective and interactive dialogue amongst all of the research participants. The use of conversation as a process, of itself, utilised Garfinkel's (1996) belief that "the reflexive nature of conversation itself helps us to grasp agents meanings" (cited in Williams & May, 1996,

p. 77). At times the researcher pro-actively used specific facilitation techniques to encourage reflexivity, interaction, and inclusiveness (Kitzinger, 1994, p.106) like open questions directed to participants who had not spoken as much as others, such as ‘what do you think?’, or asking someone ‘what do you think now?’ if they appeared to have changed their opinion during the course of the discussion. The focus group discussions were about one and a half hours long, all of which was recorded on audio tape and later transcribed by contractors who had signed a confidentiality agreement before undertaking this task (see Appendix Seven). In order to maintain confidentiality the transcribers coded all identifying factors, like names, schools, events etc. The researcher proofread the transcriptions for accuracy and ensured that all identifying factors were coded. The final transcripts provided the raw data which was analysed using the process outlined below.

## Data Analysis

As O’Leary (2005) succinctly put it, “the main game of any form of analysis is to move from raw data to meaningful understanding” (p.195). To guide this process a thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the raw data. The completed transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher in search of words, concepts, linguistic devices (like metaphors) and non-verbal cues (like laughter and voice tone) (O’Leary, 2005) that related to the key themes of ‘confidence’, ‘building confidence in self’, and ‘building confidence in others’. The transcriptions were also reviewed in search of words, concepts, linguistic devices and non-verbal cues that related to the seven theories presented in Chapter Three (namely social cognitive, psychosocial, resilience and strength based, human capital, social capital, and social cohesion). This review process included not just identifying the appearance of information and themes, but also the frequency and intensity (reflecting importance) at which these themes occurred.

Along with considering each word, concept, linguistic device and non-verbal cue, a narrative analysis (O’Leary, p.199) was undertaken by examining the unfolding of the dialogue in search of moments where it appeared that meaning and interpretation was being challenged and / or constructed. The data review process was informed by the guidance given by the cultural advisors (see Appendix Nine).

## Ethical Considerations

### Introduction

*“If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life ... for fear that I should get some of his good done to me.”*

*(Thoreau, 1977, p. 328 cited in Crush 1999, p. 211)*

Ethical considerations are integral to the methodological design of any research and “arise from an evolving understanding of the rights and duties of human beings” (Massey University, 2006, p. 4). As suggested in the above quote, research is full of examples where ‘experts’ have gone to communities to ‘study people’ with little consideration as to how ‘being studied’ might impact on those concerned. Integral to social science research is a thorough exploration and consideration of the rights, wishes, protection, and interpretations of those participating in research (Cobb, 2007; O’Leary, 2005; Gray, 2004; Denscombe, 2003; Pawson, 1999; Babbie 1986; Tolich, 2001). Below are the ethical considerations that informed this research study.

### Informed Consent

This research study involved four layers of informed consent, with each layer requiring consent before the next layer could begin. The first layer of consent involved school Principals.

Four state co-educational high schools were approached via their Principal with a request for consent to this study occurring within their school context. This approach came in the form of a letter requesting access to an institution (see Appendix Three). The researcher approached a high school Principal who was not involved in this study requesting guidance about the most effective way to ensure that the letter was received by a person holding their position. This Principal advised the researcher to phone each

Principal and alert them to the fact that this letter would be arriving in the next day or so. The purpose behind this recommendation was to highlight the letters existence in the hope that it would not get lost amongst the pile of mail Principals receive each day. The researcher initially followed this advice. She contacted the first Principal to alert them of the upcoming letter, to which that Principal asked about the contents of the letter and immediately agreed for their school to participate. However, on the phone call to the second Principal that person indicated that they were not interested in their students being involved and immediately declined consent. The researcher decided not to phone the other two schools, and not to deliver a letter of request to the Principal who had verbally denied consent via phone. Hence, three letters were delivered to three Principals, including the Principal who had consented via phone (who also consented in response to the letter). Of the other two schools contacted via letter one Principal replied via email within a week giving consent to the research. The researcher heard nothing from the other Principal for several weeks after which the researcher delivered another copy of the letter, and after a couple of days phoned the school office asking if the Principal had received the letter. A few days later the researcher received an email from that Principal declining consent to access that school. The school Principals who did not give their consent were not re-contacted. So, two Principals from the four state secondary schools gave consent for the researcher to access students in their school.

The second layer of informed consent occurred when both of the school Principals who consented to their school participating delegated their authority to a senior school staff member who, through their acceptance of this delegated authority, essentially gave their consent to participate.

The third layer of informed consent came from the cultural advisors, in that a conversation with them was (as part of the research design) required before the researcher carried out the focus group discussions with the research participants. The cultural advisors consented verbally to meet with the researcher, and they consented in writing both to our initial discussions being taped, and to the release of the transcription of these tapes.

The fourth and last layer of informed consent was from the students involved in the focus group discussions. These young adults gave their informed consent on two occasions, and both of these occasions were in writing. The first time was when they

consented to the researcher contacting them (see Appendix Four) and the second time was when they completed the consent to participate form (see Appendix Five) before the focus group discussions began. This research design provided prospective participants with an information sheet (see Appendix Two) along with an opportunity to discuss the research privately when they were first contacted by the researcher, and again within a group context with the other participants before the focus group discussions began. These opportunities to become informed about the research occurred before the final consent to participate (see Appendix Five) was requested.

Research is intrusive, and it ... relies heavily upon the goodwill of participants who may, in fact, have little to gain from their participation. As researchers, we have a responsibility to be as honest as we can at the outset so that participants really can make an informed choice about whether or not they wish to enter into all these obligations (Tolich, 2001, p. 102).

When looking at the above process used for gaining consent it is apparent that the first step involving the Principals was located at the exosystem layer of the ecological framework. The next two steps involving the Principal's delegate and the cultural advisors were located at the exosystem and mesosystem layers of the ecological framework. The last step involving the research participants was located at the microsystem layer of the ecological framework.

## Power Differentials

The next ethical consideration to be commented on is that of power differentials. The most significant power differential evident in this research design was between the participating students and the teachers / staff of the schools which they attended. This power differential is evident when considering the layers of consent identified above, in that two of the layers gave school staff the power to determine if, and which young adults got the opportunity to be involved. For those who did participate the power differential was minimised in that the actual data collection phase (the focus group discussions) occurred after they had completed their final exams for the year, and before they had actually signed out for the final time from their school. Thus, the final prize giving for the year had occurred, school reports had been completed, and the closing date for applications into many post high school opportunities (like university hostels,



teachers college and most scholarships) had already passed. At this stage the only foreseeable influence that a school staff member could have over a student was in the area of supplying a reference.

Some of the students may have felt some obligation to participate in this study because they were approached on behalf of the researcher by a senior staff member at their school. In an attempt to minimise this sense of obligation the students were initially not asked to consent to participate, but rather asked to consider participation through the request to fill out the 'Prospective Participants Form' (see Appendix Four).

## **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The next ethical issue to be highlighted is that of anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the fact that school staff members were the ones to identify the potential research participants in the first instance, along with the fact that data was collected in a group context (the focus group discussions), anonymity was not an option. However, confidentiality was proactively enhanced through the research design by using the following four strategies. First, a closed-in container box was made available at the front desk of the school office for the young adults to return their 'Prospective Participants' form (see Appendix Four). All identifying names (including individuals and groups, for example, sports teams and clubs) or places (including things like schools, work, and geographical locations) were either removed or given a code in the tape transcriptions. Before the focus group discussions began the participants were asked to avoid giving details of a confidential nature other than that which belonged to them. The last strategy involved the focus group discussions identifying and agreeing to confidentiality as a ground rule before the focus group discussions began. As a part of this participants agreed to keep both the participants (unless a participant had given their consent) and the specific contents of the focus group discussion confidential. However, it was agreed that they could share generalities. These points were revisited at the completion of the focus group discussion.

Having used the above strategies in order to enhance confidentiality, the reality is that the provincial community in which the research took place is quite small, and there will always be the possibility that a person reading this research will be able to connect the dots (for example, if a student mentioned that they were part of a debating team that

won a national competition that year). However, every effort has been made by the researcher, with the support of her supervisors, to edit information sufficiently in order to enhance confidentiality.

The transcribers of the focus group discussion tapes signed a confidentiality agreement before receiving the tapes for transcription (see Appendix Seven).

## Voluntary Participation

Voluntary participation is a central ethical issue (Cobb, 2007). Thus, all participants were reminded that they could withdraw their consent to participate right up to the point when the focus group discussion in which they were involved had been completed. As it turned out no participants withdrew their consent to participate at any stage, and all participants remained until the focus group discussion was completed.

## Potential for Harm

With regards to the potential for harm, this research journey had quite a positive focus which was not surprising since the subject for discussion was ‘confidence’, and the participants’ involved in this study were selected on the basis that they had been identified as ‘successful’ young adults. There was no apparent distress in the focus group discussions. At times there was laughter as the participants shared and made connections between their stories. Having said that, four strategies were included in the research design in order to minimise any potential for harm. The first strategy was that the researcher (as the facilitator) stated as part of the introduction that there were no right or wrong answers. The next strategy involved the development of ground rules which were agreed to by the group (see Appendix Eight). The researcher took responsibility for monitoring these ground rules, gently re-iterating them if and when required. At the end of the focus group discussion the ground rules of confidentiality and respect were repeated by the researcher.

The third strategy used by the researcher in order to minimise the potential for harm involved purposeful facilitation. This strategy recognised that the focus group participants were in actuality young people of the same age who attended the same high school, and who quite probably had common knowledge of each other’s families and friendship groups. As Cobb (2007) highlighted, the “overriding principle governing any

research with human participants is to protect the dignity and welfare of those who participate in the research” (p. 463). The researcher was mindful of her responsibility to facilitate the discussion away from any area that she perceived had the potential to detrimentally impact on a participant’s dignity or welfare. The last strategy involved identifying the name, location, and availability of the school guidance counsellor before the focus group discussions began.

## Potential for Bias

In qualitative methodologies (like focus group discussions) it has been argued “that ‘who asks’ can be as influential as ‘what is asked’ ” (Pawson, 1999, p. 38). In this study the researcher was an older woman who came from outside the school context. While the researcher went to some effort to inform the research participants that this research was a part fulfilment of her Masters in Social Work (see Appendix Two) and that she had no authority within the school context there was a possibility that just being of an older age group (similar to the demographic of their parents) influenced the focus group discussions. Having acknowledged that, it could be equally argued that a researcher of the same age group and from within the same school context could have also influenced the focus group discussions. In either scenario the focus group participants may have over or under stated some aspects to create a desired impression. Another way this potential for bias could have manifested itself related to how the researcher responded to the information shared in the focus group discussions. The researcher chose which comments to explore further, and which comments to ignore. These decisions were inevitably influenced by the researcher’s frame of reference, and undoubtedly at times impacted on the direction of the focus group discussion. This same potential for bias was also evident throughout the interpretation of data phase, and the writing up of the findings since “the basis of interpretation is the filtering of observations and inputs through theoretical and analytical frameworks that are ... imbued with a researcher’s own worldview” (Pawson, 1999, p. 120). This reality challenges the assertion that this is purely an ethnographic and constructivist piece of research, since if this was actually the case then the participating young adults would have been responsible for all aspects of this research, including the interpretation of the data. Acknowledging this potential for bias is one way of making the vulnerability of this research methodology transparent.

Another potential for bias related to the layers of informed consent that were required (essentially involving a filtering process) before the focus group discussion participants were finally engaged (as outlined above). It could be argued that Principals of schools who held a positive view of their staff and their Year 13 students were more likely to consent to participate in this research project. It could also be argued that Principals, staff, and Year 13 students who had an interest in 'confidence', or perhaps a belief in the value of research were more likely to consent to participate.

## Conflict of Interest

This research was based in a provincial New Zealand community, and, as such, there was the potential for the lives of those involved in this research (including the researcher) to overlap in more than one context. This potential overlap was scrutinised by the researcher with the support of her supervisors, and any possibility for a conflict of interest was identified and significantly minimised during the research planning stage. The researcher had no role (outside of this research) within the participating schools, nor did she have any direct personal relationship (other than that of researcher) with any person involved with this study. The researcher was not receiving any payment or any other reward (other than completing her studies) from undertaking this research project.

## Data Protection

The focus group discussion tapes, the transcriptions of these tapes, and the consent forms, will be stored under lock and key at the researcher's residence for five years, after which they will be destroyed. The tapes, the transcriptions of those tapes, and the consent forms will each be stored in different locations within the researcher's place of residence. Only the researcher and her two supervisors will have access to the research data in its raw form.

## Ownership of the Research

The research findings will remain the property of the researcher. Having said that, the researcher will ensure that a summary of the findings will be supplied to all of the focus group participants (at the end of the focus group discussions the young adults were

asked to write down their preferred email address if they would like a copy of the research findings forwarded to them. All of the participants chose to do this). A summary of the findings will also be forwarded to the Principals of the two participating schools, and the cultural advisors with whom the researcher consulted. As well as the above, the research findings will be more widely disseminated via two bound copies being given to Massey University, one article based on this research being written and submitted to an appropriate outlet for publication, and a copy of this article being forwarded to fifteen organisations whose primary focus of work is the wellbeing of children and young people. This will include Government and Non Government organisations.

The next Chapter outlines the findings from this research study.

## Chapter Six

# Research Findings

## Young adults share their thoughts

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### Introduction

It has been well argued that findings presented in research reports are far from objective since methodological positioning embedded within the research journey impacts on the focus, the method, the filter, and the analysis that is presented as findings (Montuschi, 2003, p. 54). The methodological perspectives used in this study have been explicitly outlined in Chapter Five.

The findings in this thesis have been drawn from the transcriptions of the focus group discussions in which sixteen young adults reflected on, and shared their thoughts on the 'concept of confidence', 'building confidence in self', and 'building confidence in others'. These three themes provided the framework for the findings that are presented in this chapter. The findings on the 'concept of confidence' tend to link with the microsystem layer of the ecological framework (refer pages 22 to 25 of this report). The findings on 'building confidence in self' tends to link with the microsystem and the mesosystem layers of the ecological framework. The findings on 'building confidence in others' tends to link with the mesosystem and the exosystem layers of the ecological framework. All of these themes sit within macrosystem and chronosystem layers of the ecological framework, being the context of provincial New Zealand society in 2010. When information supplied under one theme had relevance to another, cross referencing occurred.

As an ethnographic piece of research the findings have included several direct quotes from the sixteen participants, thus enhancing the opportunity for young adults to speak for themselves. In order to preserve confidentiality the name of each person has been

changed to a letter of the alphabet, thus they have been coded from young adult A through to young adult P. Due to the word limit of this research report quotes have been edited to remove superfluous information. When young adults repeated themselves, used utterances such as ‘yeh’ or ‘ummmm’, or ‘ahhh’, used conversational fillers such as ‘you know’, ‘like’ or ‘I don’t know’, gave identifying details, or provided extra information that detracted from the main story, this was often (but not always) replaced with the use of three dots. The times when these components have not been edited were when I believed they gave the reader a sense of the young adult’s expression, and to remove them would leave behind a more sterile voice. Every young adult has been quoted at least once in these findings, with the median number of quotes attributed to one person being seven. This demonstrates inclusiveness of multiple voices as compared to the quotes being drawn from only one or two of the research participants. A demographic profile of the research participants is outlined on page 54 of this report.

## **Section A: Theme -The concept of 'confidence'**

*“Confidence is ... what makes you as a person.”*

(Young adult G)

Using a question guideline the first theme that was explored in the focus group discussions was the ‘concept of confidence’ (see Appendix Eight). As a part of this the young adults were asked to share definitions of confidence, examples of being confident, the feelings they attached to confidence, and how they observed confidence in others. The findings from these discussions have been shared below.

### **Defining confidence**

The research participants did not seem to find it easy to define confidence, as one young adult commented the only word they could think of to define ‘confidence’ was ‘confidence’. However, over the course of the discussions in both groups a variety of

meanings began to emerge. Reviewing the data it became apparent ‘confidence’ was something that:

- Participants personally identify existed (to varying degrees and in varying situations) within themselves.
- Had an impact both as a feeling and as an enabler (or, in its absence, a disabler).
- Was a desirable thing to have.
- Involved self-awareness, self-belief, and pride in self.
- Provided some protection.
- Could be consciously and proactively enhanced by oneself and by others.
- Was integral to a person’s very being.
- Was not necessarily visible to anyone other than the person concerned.
- Indicated congruency between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ person.

Having identified some shared understandings provided by the young adults the findings now highlight some examples they gave that demonstrated ‘confidence’.

## Some examples of being confident

Analysis of the transcripts identified nine often interdependent examples that, according to the research participants, demonstrated ‘confidence’. These examples included physical stature, being comfortable with oneself, believing in one’s self worth, being able to speak out, not being phased by the unknown, having faith in one’s decisions, willingness to try new things, and having a sense of a direction. Each of these examples is elaborated upon below.

Stature and the way they physically presented themselves, including standing tall, looking directly at people, and holding their head high in public, was specifically mentioned.

*“Walking down the street with your head held high, just not staunch like gangster, but just held high, just confident looking.”* (Young adult E)

The ability to be comfortable and relaxed both with their own company and within their own skin (even in unfamiliar situations) was mentioned by a few young adults.



*“It’s like being able to walk into a room and you just ... you don’t mind being there by yourself. If everyone’s in little groups ... you’re fine by yourself.”* (Young adult K)

*“Being able to react to different situations ... like if you go into a room and ... you don’t have your group to hang out, like, they’re not there, there’s a different kind of group and they just look at you and stuff but you can just be yourself.”* (Young adult P)

While there seemed to be a general consensus that being comfortable with your own company was an example of being confident, there were different opinions with regards to whether a young adult was more likely to be confident amongst friends or amongst strangers. This seemed to depend on the context and circumstances.

*“I was thinking ... it’s when you have people around you that you know you also feel more confident. Like all of us here, we all know each other and so then you feel more confident in saying what you like, but if you’re with people you don’t know it’s harder.”* (Young adult O)

*“When you’re around people that you know you feel more confident. I would agree with that most of the time but when I’m .....playing like a song on stage I would much prefer to just have like a large audience of people I didn’t know to a small audience of people I did know, I’d be much more scared of playing in front of, like.....like close friends or family, or sing, cause I’d probably care more about it.”* (Young adult L)

As an extension of the above comments one young adult suggested that confidence was not just impacted on by who was around, but also by what they were doing.

*“There is different types of confidence I think you could say. Cause you could be comfortable speaking with a group of people, but if someone said to kick a rugby ball through the goal post, you may not be as confident ... I think it’s very rare to find someone who is confident with everything.”* (Young Adult H)

Belief in their own self-worth, along with their qualities and capabilities was considered to be a demonstration of confidence by several of the young adults from both of the groups.

*“I’m just thinking, going into an exam ... you’ve done all you can and now you just have to do it ... you know where you’re at and you’ve put the hard work in ... to have the confidence to say ... right, I know all of this stuff.”*

(Young adult M)

*“For me, going away ... to uni ... and I don’t know anyone going ... I’m thinking, oh.. gosh, you know but...you’ve always gotta think, since I’m here, I deserve to be here. I’ve had the confidence and I should believe in myself that I’m just like everyone else and, you know, I made it.”* (Young adult D)

One young adult gave an example that suggested that their self-belief and confidence actually provided them with some protection from being bullied.

*“You’ve just gotta be confident with your own beliefs cause when I started school, I was doing ballet, and ... then I also took up rugby in the same year ... I did get a few people mocking me but then people started realising that ... there’s no point picking on him ... they actually saw that I had confidence in myself and stood up to the people that tried bullying me, so they stepped back ... and that’s helped me through high school because people start respecting you ... for having your own beliefs and then when people start paying respect to you, you get more confident ... third, and fourth form there was ... guys thought they were cool ... they just picked on other people, and when I just stood up to them they were just like ... ‘what’s the point of picking on him?’ ”*

(Young adult E)

Being prepared to share their point of view and consistently speak up for what they believed in, even with the knowledge that this might be controversial, was shared as an illustration of being confident.

*“I think being able to stand up for what you believe in, like that’s a huge thing*

*with confidence, especially when, like peer pressure I suppose ... where if you were the person who had different values or whatever, that you can still stand up for those values.”* (Young adult A)

*“I’ve ... spoken for ... ‘smoke free’ sort of things ... and like one time I went to speak to Parliament and I was so scared ... speaking in front of all these people ... but I still had the confidence, like I knew what I was talking about, and ... I believed that I was right.”* (Young adult B)

Research participants talked about not being phased or unhinged by the unknown or the unexpected as being a demonstration of confidence. This ability to be laid back and ‘go with the flow’ was attributed by some people to experience, while others specifically connected it to confidence.

*“Being able to do things unprepared ... I would now be confident to do speeches because we’ve done a diploma in public speaking so we, we have these skills, and have been taught what we need to be taught, to be able to stand up and speak off the cuff.”* (Young adult F)

*“It’s being able to adapt to different things as well.”* (Young adult O)

The sixteen young adults almost unanimously agreed that having faith in their own ability to make good decisions, and being prepared to stand by those decisions (even in the face of opposition) was a clear indicator of confidence.

*“Hard decisions, or not even hard, but ones that other people may not approve of, even like for me next year, I’m off to bible college, and everyone is like ‘what the hell’, like, actually that’s the first response, but for me it’s the best thing and I’m confident, so I think I’ve convinced some people ... not that it matters ... I’m just happy with my future, to make the decisions.”*

(Young adult G)

Having the ability to identify and take advantage of opportunities in a way that suggested that they would ‘give anything a go’ was mentioned several times throughout

the discussion with both focus groups as being a clear indicator of confidence. As a part of this was a perception that failure was not necessarily a bad thing in that it provided a useful opportunity for learning.

*“I’m going to say that confidence ... is being able to give anything a go regardless of whether ... you can achieve well at it, and even if you don’t achieve, to the absolute top, or if you fail at it, that you know that it wasn’t a waste of effort because you’ve learnt something, whether about yourself or about whatever it is you’re doing. So I think it’s ... being able to give things a go regardless of what the result is going to be.”* (Young adult F)

Both groups shared that having some future direction or pathway identified, along with a sense that they could have some influence over achieving this, was an indicator of confidence.

*“It’s like what someone else said it’s about ... future, like knowing what you’re doing ... it’s more of a inside thing of confidence rather than an outward sign.”* (Young adult H)

*“Part of it is ... knowing ... what you want and like in a way I guess, how to get it sort of thing, but it’s just like ... knowing that you can do whatever it is.”*  
(Young adult B)

Along with sharing some examples of confidence from their experience, the research participants were asked to describe the feelings they associated with being confident. Their reflections on this are shared below.

## The feeling of being confident

The young adults were asked to describe confidence from the ‘inside’ in an endeavor to locate the feeling words that they associated with ‘confidence’. Many initially struggled with this, and it became a question that was re-visited a few times as the young adults integrated their experiences with their feeling based responses and interpretations.

During the course of the discussion feeling words used included ‘comfortable’, ‘warm’,

‘happy’, ‘self-love’, ‘complete’, ‘proud’ and ‘special’. From the data it became clear that ‘confidence’ was unanimously seen as a positive emotion.

*“A warm fuzzy feeling ... you’re like, feel complete.”* (Young adult E)

*“It’s just a feeling that you don’t need to care about what the result is. It’s inevitable whatever happens. It’s just a positive feeling that you’re going to go and do this thing.”* (Young adult F)

*“I think confidence is kind of being happy within yourself.”* (Young adult H)

Having clarified that the research participants on the whole perceived ‘confidence’ to be a positive emotion, the findings now describes some of the indicators used to inform the research participants when others were confident.

## Observing when other people are confident

When asked how they could tell if and when other people were confident the young adults gave several examples that fitted into three general areas of observation. These included an experiential sense that a person was confident, indicators that a person had a clear direction, and the competencies of a person’s social skills, in particular, their interpersonal communication skills. These findings differed from the key indicator used in this research study (as expressed through the research question and research design) which linked the observation of confidence in others to the recognition of success within a school context. The three general areas of observation are further clarified below.

The participants in both focus groups seemed to agree that they could sense if another person was confident just by a person’s general demeanor.

*“Lots of people have a quiet confidence about them, like just the way they conduct themselves is not even out there, it’s just like, a calm peace about them ... If you have a quiet confidence, you don’t need to assert it.”*

(Young adult G)

*“If you’re with a confident person it sort of exudes ... you can feel ... as though they take up more space. Whereas a shy or a less confident person will sort of huddle, but a confident person will open up ... and allow people ... to experience, I don’t know, to experience themselves.”* (Young adult M)

Having a plan for the future was an indicator of confidence in others. Interacting with this was observing others turn those plans into a reality.

*“Last night I was talking to a friend of mine ... and he’s made ... a small ... Company ... all of his family are incredibly academic ... and his partner ... she comes from a family of lawyers ... and they’ve gone completely the opposite direction. They left school, worked in crap jobs, saved up a couple of thousand dollars to buy equipment and ... just working their way into the industry, and everyone ... are just kinda going “you’re crazy” but he feels that’s best for him and I think he’s gained a lot of confidence over the past couple of years’ cause he’s done that.”* (Young adult L)

Competent social skills, particularly interpersonal communication skills, were identified in both groups as an example of confidence in others, with the interpretation being that these skills enabled people to mix, communicate, and socialise within a wide range of contexts.

*“For me confidence is someone who can sit, face you and talk to you.”*

(Young adult E)

*“I think confidence is being able to relate and engage in all sorts of different contexts with different people, like feeling comfortable with adults, with children, on stage, with one person.”* (Young adult G)

After listening to the young adults, and re-reading the transcriptions, it seemed that they shared a common understanding that ‘confidence’ as a concept existed, was enabling, and was a positive and desirable thing to have. When asked to attach some feeling words to ‘confidence’ there was no challenge or dispute as to whether this was possible, which suggested that there was a shared belief that ‘confidence’ had a link with

emotion, although the young adults had some difficulty finding the appropriate words to express this emotion. However, as they integrated their experiences, and listened to others, the research participants were able locate feeling words that they attributed to confidence. A general definition of confidence shared by one of the young adults that seemed to capture many of the key components was:

*“Confidence is like knowing exactly who you are, and being able to portray who you are. So ... having that pride in the person that you are, inside and out, and being able to show that to everybody else ... being able to show who you are ... that’s that next level to say - this is who I am.”* (Young adult O)

After listening to the transcriptions of the focus group discussions, and drawing on the above quote, an emergent definition of confidence was formulated by the researcher and is now presented below.

## **An emergent definition of confidence**

**Confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others.**

Having explored the concept of ‘confidence’, and located an emergent definition of ‘confidence’, the next theme presented in these findings focuses on the young adults thoughts around building confidence in themselves.

## **Section B: Theme - 'Building confidence in self'**

Using a question guideline the second theme explored in the focus group discussions was ‘building confidence in self’ (see Appendix Eight). The young adults were asked to identify some of the things that from their perspective contributed to the building of their confidence, and to reflect on how this occurred. The research participants were also asked to share if and how confidence has assisted them within a variety of contexts, including at school and in the wider community. The last topic explored within this

theme related to whether or not any of the things that contributed to building confidence were, from the young adults perspective, unique to their ethnicity.

The first finding of interest was that some of the young adults could not recall ever not being confident. Somewhere in their early years a self confidence developed (presuming babies were not born with confidence, although they may have a psycho-social pre-disposition to confidence being enhanced) and had been consistently reinforced.

*I can't think of the time when I got confidence ... just at a young age.*

(Young Adult O)

On the other hand, some young adults could clearly recall times when they lacked confidence, and were able to share quite specific events that enhanced their confidence. Whatever the foundation, there was very much a sense of a confidence trajectory (Kanter, 2004) occurring, in that once the young adults had a confidence enhancing experience, this of itself often had a cyclic and reinforcing dynamic within, which in turn built confidence.

In analysing the transcriptions of the tapes eight general factors (in part influenced by the research questions) that contributed to building confidence emerged, including personal attributes, unconditional support and acceptance, the schools contribution, the input of the wider community, success, sharing knowledge and skills, observing others, and the contribution of ethnicity. These components were often (although not always) seen as being interactive, but for clarity are highlighted separately below.

## **Personal attributes**

In reviewing the data there were many examples of young adults identifying a personal skill or attribute that they believed contributed to the building of their confidence. These included having a positive self-regard, a belief in their capabilities, competent social skills, determination, hard work, and innate abilities. Each of these personal attributes is discussed below.



The first personal attributes to be presented related to young adults believing in themselves and in their capabilities. This was considered an essential factor in building confidence, and something that could be consciously and proactively enhanced.

*“I know that I’m going to be confident because I’ve done it before, or I’ve done something similar... I only went to a little country primary school and I went from a school of fifty to a school of over three hundred and it was quite different, so going to varsity, when there’s thirty thousand ... well I’ve done it from primary to intermediate, so why can’t I do from high school to uni?”* (Young adult C)

*“I can do it, I can get that, I can achieve that goal, and ... maybe from an early age ... some of us wanted to achieve something or got inspired by something or had a role model or something, who we said ... I want to do that and, so, like you have to say to yourself you can do it, to do it.”* (Young adult J)

The next personal attribute to be mentioned was social skills (particularly interpersonal communication skills) which, according to the research participants, enabled them to engage positively with those around them.

*“Even in life when you’re a little kid ... you’re real nervous but you build up the confidence to start making friends and then that helps you out through your whole life because ... you’re always practising how to make new friends. So you are always getting a little bit more confident”* (Young adult E)

The third personal attribute concerned the young adults inner determination to succeed, and this determination being backed up by their own hard work (be that study or training).

*“To get confidence you’ve gotta practice ... it’s not like you’re gonna go out and never kick a soccer ball and play in the English premiersip league cause you’re not confident ... you gotta do the hard yards.”* (Young adult E)

In one focus group discussion a participant expressed a belief that it was pretty much all about hard work, determination and practice when striving for success (and the confidence that came from that success) rather than innate ability

*“I personally don’t think much of natural ability ... I’m a big fan of hard work ... last year ... I decided what I was going to do, I set myself a goal that I decided I could achieve ... everyone else laughed at me.”* (Young adult M)

This young adult’s viewpoint was directly challenged by another participant who proposed that while hard work was undoubtedly valuable, if a person did not have some innate ability they would not experience the same level of success no matter how much hard work, determination and practice was involved.

*“Your hard work is the reason that you are, like, excelling that much, but ... if you didn’t have the brains to back it up, you could put in that much hard work and be an M [merit rather than excellence] student.”* (Young adult L)

The connection between innate ability and building confidence was re-visited a couple of times by participants in both groups, with some clearly crediting innate ability as having had a significant contribution.

*“Just randomly being able to do something that you didn’t expect that you could do is just amazing ... if you try something that you’ve never tried before and you just happen to be good at it, it’s like, I’m good at this, there might be other things that I’m good at as well that I’ve never attempted. It encourages you to do other things.”* (Young adult F)

*“Just because you’re good at one thing can push those boundaries and then your confidence sort of overflows into other areas which are kind of similar and then that gets better... you kind of... then confidence just grows.”* (Young adult A)

Offering another perspective one young adult shared that for them an innate ability they had not enhanced by hard work actually ended up undermining their confidence. It seemed that while the innate ability made something easier to start with, it was not

enough on its own to continue ensuring success, and the eventual experience of failing undermined their confidence.

*“Innate ability is actually also sort of a dangerous thing to have sometimes ... it’s useful to a point, and then after that you actually have to work for things ... I took up flute in primary school ... and flew through the first three or four exams and I found it really really easy ... and then I got to about grade four and discovered that my innate ability was no longer going to carry me through these exams, I actually had to start working for things. And I think ... that sort of has the potential to be a bit of a confidence destroyer, so you get to a certain point and you can’t do it any more with your innate ability ... your confidence might go down a little bit.”* (Young adult F)

In the same focus group another participant, upon reflection, and after hearing others point of view, declared that innate ability in its own right did build their confidence, and should be treasured for what it is.

*“I was just thinking that innate abilities must give me confidence, cause if I’m not good at something, I feel stupid, like, I didn’t get this concept, like calculus in year 12, and I was just so embarrassed ... failing multiple tests, it’s not what I normally do, and I felt real awful, and so I was like well, I should be grateful for what I am good at.”* (Young adult G)

Yet another participant in this focus group shared that for them it was identifying what they were not innately good at that assisted them on identifying their strengths, which in turn supported the building of their confidence.

*“From my point of view, it’s what you’re not good at ... Mum and Dad were coaches and [my brothers] were in separate teams, Mum and Dad coached each team, so during the week while I was at primary school I had the choice of going to one person’s cricket practice, or the other person’s ... at first ... I’d try playing, and it’s like ‘no, you’re useless, so don’t do it, you’ll make an idiot of yourself’... so I would sit under the tree and eat other people’s lunches ... and I would get bored and annoyed ...so the whole way through you carry on and it’s*

*like ... OK I wasn't good at P.E but I participated so, you know, I like participation ... I like the social aspects ... and in the first lesson I got hit in the side of the face on the sideline at basketball cause I was talking..... so when you're ... I've personally found, narrowed down in that respect ... and now I'm relying slightly on academic, I'm quite talkative, and I can argue a point, and, I wouldn't talk in front of the school but I can talk in a classroom ... I can do a little bit of drama. I got a bit of natural rhythm.” (Young adult H)*

It is worth mentioning that during the above narrative (which has been edited for the sake of the word count) many of the young adults listening were chuckling (in a positive and affirming way). It seemed that some of them had known this person for years and could relate to the story. So when the story ended and one of the participants commented ‘and you are one hell of a comedian’ the rest of the group laughed and clapped. There was a real sense of appreciation, inclusion and respect for the honesty that was shared. When the researcher asked the story teller how the journey that they had just shared built their confidence, they responded ‘I’ve just told you my story and I’ve got a laugh’. This suggested that success in the social arena (making people laugh) is also a confidence builder.

On analysing the data it became evident that the discussion around the relationship between innate ability, hard work and practice, and success and confidence, had some participants in both discussion groups changing their viewpoint. Another component young people identified that contributed to building their confidence was having the unconditional support, encouragement, and belief of someone else. This is elaborated on below.

## **Unconditional support, encouragement and belief in the young person by someone else.**

From analysing the transcripts it became apparent that the vast majority of the research participants agreed with the notion that having some other person believe in them, and provide unconditional encouragement and support, was a significant ingredient in

building their confidence.

*“If people believe in you ... that gives you some confidence.”* (Young adult E)

*“I think confidence is kind of a collective thing, the more people who are confident in you, the more confident you can be.”* (Young adult F)

Families (particularly parents) were most often (but not always) mentioned as the primary source of the unconditional support, encouragement, and belief that contributed to a young adult's confidence.

*“I think ... if your family support what you want to do, you'll always have the confidence to do that ... allowing you to be who you want to be, I think that's the biggest one, without pushing you to do it. Just supporting it.”* (Young adult I)

*“I think the biggest one is support and right from the start ... parents that are involved ... in whatever you want to do ... even if they disagree ... or it's not their thing ... I suppose confidence comes from knowing that if you fail at whatever you set out to do, you've always got them to fall back on.”* (Young adult H)

*“I just think ... you need some support ... for me it's my family because ... my Mum and Dad are always the ones that tell me like, how good you are ... it sounds weird but you need someone to tell you, to remind you that.”*

(Young adult J)

While family provided most of the young adults unconditional support, acceptance and belief in younger years, at this stage of their life several of the participants were inclined to seek this unconditional support from other people. The reasons given for this included feeling high expectations from families and not wanting to disappoint them, believing that families always say 'well done' when actually this may not be the case and others outside the family might be more objective (in this scenario it was proposed that unconditional support was not always useful when striving to achieve), when the young adult perceived a value or belief conflict with their family, or when they

perceived that their own family was dysfunctional.

*“Like family can be bizzare ... they can be the last person you’d go to for help, maybe, if you didn’t want to disappoint them ... I’d probably talk ... to friends.”*

(Young adult M)

*“I ... find that with my family, they have a high expectation of me, and sometimes I’m afraid to meet their expectations ... my Mother was the first one in all of my family to go to university so she has the same expectation of us that we need to excel above her ... that pressure can sometimes I think lessen your confidence.”* (Young adult K)

*“I think that it’s not always the family ... my family is loving but incredibly dysfunctional ... I went to a terrible primary school ... “I used to get beaten the crap out of me and then I moved in the last year to a different primary school and there ... the kids that I was in the class with were a lot more supportive, and ... got me into extracurricular things like drama groups and stuff ... then I got into ... one of the better schools ... and so, like, I’ve got a lot of confidence from the drama side of things, but I lost a lot of confidence ... intellectually cause I went from being at the school where I was beaten up where I just got top in everything cause there wasn’t really many people there, to being right at the bottom rung at this really good school. But then when I moved [to the current school] ... I kind of gained back some of that confidence ... not because I got any better but because there’s just a really good support system here ... a lot of the teachers are what I would call friends and ... people in my year, I didn’t realise thought well of me ... that kinda gave me more confidence ... my family will help me in a lot of things, but ... my family are not my foundation like that, and I think it’s ... the family I’ve made of friends, of teachers, of extracurricular ... people that have helped me ... it’s those people that I’ll fall back on when I need it ... have boosted me up, and it’s those people that will seek out to help me when I don’t even realise that I need the help.”*

(Young adult L)

As some of the stories shared above have highlighted, unconditional encouragement, support and belief can come from within and / or outside the family group. The

contribution that people within a school context, and within the wider community, have on building confidence has already been touched on above. However, both of these contexts are considered in more detail below, beginning with school.

## School

When young adults were prompted about if and how the school environment supported the building of their confidence both focus groups were most forthcoming, and they both identified seven very similar ways in which this had occurred for them. These seven ways were interconnected and have been outlined below.

The first related to the school environment being safe, particularly from bullying (from the mild end of intimidation to the more severe end of physical bullying). It seemed that feeling safe at school enabled the students to focus more on the actual activities and opportunities provided, rather than being distracted by their personal safety.

*“School is quite ... not strict ... but it’s a safe environment that you know that you can talk to other people because for instance in some other schools if you try and talk to other people you get a hiding you’d get punched or something.”*

(Young adult E)

*“Here we don’t have a set area for juniors and seniors that they have at other schools, like at [another school] they have a certain field for seniors, and I’ve had friends who have gone on that field and have been attacked by the seniors ... and here coming into like year nine or ten I was ... well I was scared when I came here, but when I was here I wasn’t scared. So I was able to build my confidence because there was really no one here that was scary to me like that, even though there were people that were like ... grown men still at school.”* (Young adult C)

Second, creating diverse, meaningful and inclusive opportunities for students to positively interact across age groups, gender, culture, interests and abilities within a school context was considered to be a builder of confidence. Examples of how this had

occurred included buddy classes, house events, sports events and music productions.

*“Stuff like music productions, like doing all the practices with people, even like I did the year ten one ... like years ago ... and we were just ... like ... real hard out bond.”* (Young adult G)

*“I think what the school’s done in terms of building my confidence is it’s given us all of these opportunities to get into a situation where we can make new friends and friends in different year levels ... all of these sporting events and cultural events in which you’re going to be put in situations where you’re in a group of people that you don’t necessarily know but who have the same interests as you ... it’s given us all of these opportunities to build our confidence by making new friends by doing something with new people ... that we collectively enjoy.”*

(Young adult F)

This fed into the third way in that the opportunities for positive interaction mentioned above contributed to a general ambience of encouragement, acceptance and inclusiveness within the more informal aspect of school life, for example, during interval and school lunch breaks.

*“Obviously there’s going to be groups and it’s a big enough school for there to be groups, but it’s also kind of, a type of environment where all the groups are still friends with each other, like even through the year groups ... I’ve got friends in all of the year levels and that for me has been the best thing from this school about building confidence.”* (Young adult B)

*“Anyone could go onto the field and play touch with the gangster guys ... at other schools if you did that the guys just play in their own little cliques or own little groups ... for example, I was playing tennis with third formers the other day and I’m seventh form, it’s just a real safe environment at school.”* (Young adult E)

The fourth way identified from the data related to teachers being approachable and supportive. While it was generally agreed that not all of the teachers had these qualities for all of the students, research participants were able to identify teachers who,



according to them, had contributed significantly to building their confidence. These teachers were spoken of most fondly and respectfully, and were attributed with having had a significant impact not only on their confidence, but also on their willingness to take advantage of opportunities, and on their overall success.

*“I’ve just thought about it now, it’s like the same talk as we talked about family, for me they were exactly the same ... I know the Principal, I know ... all of the teachers ... I class them in the same category as family cause I know that they will let me go off and be stupid, but then they go ‘come back whenever you need me, I’ll give you a reference, I’ll help you out’ ... they’re people that you can fall back on in a way ... just like family.”* (Young adult E)

*“Teachers have a big part of it as well ... you’ve gotta have their support behind you. It’s great hearing words coming from them ... it just pushes you that extra ... more ... and ... it’s encouragement.”* (Young adult D)

The next feature is schools providing a variety of opportunities at many different levels and at diverse degrees of intensity. Hence, it wasn’t all about just targeting the top (be that academic, sport, cultural etc), although targeting the top was considered important. It was also about providing encouragement for all students to ‘give it a go’.

*“The opportunities that I get ... that does build my confidence ... definitely the classes ... when you go on extensions, or when you have more option classes ... you can specialize in what you are good at ... you ... don’t have to ... go to school and be good at English, you can go to school and be good at netball, and be recognized for that.”* (Young adult O)

*“Some schools ... if you play soccer and you’re pretty good at it, you were like classed an elitist, and so they just make you just focus on that sport but with [my school] ... they allow you to do everything.”* (Young adult E)

*“Doing something that you haven’t done before ... that’s what the school ... allows you to do ... if you’re not exactly confident or good at it, or ... you’re just experimenting, they will still allow you to do that ... they’ll let you have that*

*experience and see what you feel about it after you've done it, so I think that is really good.”* (Young adult D)

The sixth factor (within the school context) that contributed to building young adults confidence was providing older students an opportunity to take on a leadership role within the school community. Three of the young adults in one group shared how at the start of the year there were more young adults wanting leadership roles than there were leadership roles available. In response to the situation their school created extra authentic leadership positions. This was acknowledged and very much appreciated by the young adults concerned and was specifically identified as contributing to their confidence.

*“One thing that the school did this year... they introduced something called a community leader, where us three ... are all community leaders ... we wanted to be involved in helping lead the school ... so they made that opportunity available to us, and made this new thing, I think there was eight of us all up, and so that kind of really helped my confidence.”* (Young adult A)

The researcher prompted the young adults to reflect on if and how their socio-economic situation impacted on building their confidence within the school context. Initially both groups discussed the meaning of ‘socio-economic’ in order to gain some common understanding, after which there was general agreement amongst several participants that this had some impact on them accessing opportunity. In one group a couple of young adults shared how their lack of available finances had caused them some difficulties paying school related expenses. However, when they approached a school staff member about this that staff member went out of their way to assist, either by personally covering costs, or pro-actively fundraising. While the public fundraising activities were known by the wider group, many of them had no idea of the more private financial support that had been going on, even though they were friends with some of those who had received financial support. This links back to the theme at the start around personal attributes, in that if a student did not ask for help, it is quite possible that others (including the supportive staff members) would not have known that cost

was a prohibitive factor.

*“For me I did [names a sport] and it was \$90 ... my parents couldn’t afford it, so I had to pay for it, and I didn’t have \$90, so you talk to[a staff member]about it and they found a way around it ... obviously people who don’t have the money won’t be able to do it, but the school is, ‘we’ll work a way around it’. And like when we had the drama one, I can’t remember how much it was, but the teacher was like, if you can’t afford it now, I’ll pay for it and you can just pay me back, at like \$2.”* (Young adult A)

In the other focus group a couple of young adults shared how they believed their socio-economic background along with the location of their school enabled them to have access to wider opportunities. However another participant in the same group disagreed with this, sharing that from their perspective people individuals and schools’ can make opportunities happen regardless of socio-economic factors.

*“I was at a decile two high school until earlier this year and I had ... heaps of opportunities there, but because I pushed for them, like I sort of ... demanded it, but ... like, the teaching staff and the Principal ... were interested in, and ... put a lot of effort in ... which sort of gives you that feeling that you are worth it.”*

(Young adult M)

While participants in both of the focus groups identified the above seven factors within their school context as contributing to their confidence, some young adults (including Māori and non Māori) in one group specifically shared how having a place of belonging, achieving, and recognition from a kaupapa Māori perspective contributed to their confidence. These participants also suggested that they would like to see kaupapa Māori integrated further into the wider school community.

*“We do a lot of performing arts and that’s a different community within the school as well, like the Māori side, and I know that it’s traditional for us to be like a family and we show that in our class, like if someone achieves something everyone has to acknowledge them ... whether it’s a big hug or something, or a*

*pat on the back ... it's shown, and if it's something major we will perform a haka for them ... just on the spot ... I wish that hopefully in the future that it's shown more around the whole school itself, and that it is like let out."*

(Young adult D)

*"When I did kapa haka I felt like ... it was so scary, like petrifying, but I felt really included ... especially how [names a teacher] ... is like a leader and ... she was always so encouraging to me. And I was scared of her when I was year ten ... but three years later ... I just felt so included, like they'd take me aside and show me poi and ... some schools would go, 'oh my goodness, the two little white girls', but no, me and ... we felt real included which was real cool."* (Young adult G)

The next part of this chapter discusses the young adults experiences and perceptions on how the wider community has contributed to building their confidence.

## The wider community

Some of the young adults clearly attributed the building of their confidence to experiences and opportunities that they had within the wider community, rather than in their family or school context. Within this broader arena two general contexts were identified, one was within an employment situation, and the other one was as a member of a community group. These are discussed separately below.

Many of the focus group participants had part-time and holiday employment (for some of the participants the income from this was essential to enabling them to participate more fully in other activities). Experiences relating to securing these positions, interfacing with the wider public as a part of their job, and developing supportive friendships from work colleagues all contributed to building their confidence. Much of this can also be linked to the findings already mentioned regarding opportunities and the value of competent social skills (particularly interpersonal communication).

*"Getting a job, if you could go and have an interview with someone, and they look at your school records and things but they ask you questions, and they hear what you have to say and then when you get offered a job ... you've gotten somewhere*

*for being yourself and for your achievements ... I think that builds confidence, and being able to know that the attributes they're looking for you have."*

(Young adult N)

*"The job really helped me, I worked at ... a shoe store and ... I had to just ... go up to people and talk to ... strangers and I used to like be really afraid of that but ... now it's helped build my confidence to just talk to strangers ... which is cool."*

(Young adult J)

While some young adults shared how their employment opportunities had contributed to their confidence, others commented that their jobs had actually decreased their confidence. This was particularly the case if they did not get on with their employer, other staff members, or if they did not actually like or have an interest in the work.

*"I never got the hang of just walking up to people and asking to help, and I think it was cause I was completely fish out of water ... like ... I wanted some money for a guitar so I went and gave in my CV everywhere and the only place that called back was the shoe shop and I don't know anything about shoes to save my life ... shoes are completely not my thing."* (Young adult L)

Some young adults shared quite strongly how it was their involvement in their community based activities, rather than school, that had contributed to building their confidence. Having said that, the experiences and examples given were quite similar to those given within the school context, in that factors like being involved in a wide range of activities, having a diverse range of opportunities, along with the encouragement and support that they had received featured in their stories.

*"I've had ... various roles ... in the community ... I didn't get any of it through school for the first couple of years, school had no idea that I was doing these things ... so ... the community ... actually helped me build my confidence."*

(Young adult G)

*"It's the fact that they give you all of these chances to build your confidence, they give you all of these things that you can do ... I've always enjoyed taking every*

*opportunity, getting into absolutely everything I can ... and it's built my confidence to try new things as well ... just all of these chances for you to prove yourself.”* (Young adult F)

Having discussed the contribution that others play (be that families, people from within the school, or from wider community), the next part of this chapter presents the young adults perspective regarding the contribution success had on building their confidence.

## Success

In analysing the data it became clear that the research participants in both groups quickly made a direct connection between experiencing success and the building of their confidence.

*“The results that you get ... is a reassurance of yourself ... whatever you've tried to do ... and if you succeed then that's ... assurance of your abilities which makes you more confident in your abilities.”* (Young adult J)

However, as the discussion unfolded it became apparent that for most of the young adults it was the public acknowledgement and recognition of their success that provided the powerful confidence building formula.

*“I think you could have all the success in the world but if you don't have people there to recognize you and say good job then the confidence probably wouldn't be as good as ... if you were recognized for that.”* (Young adult J)

*“At intermediate I was in form two and, yup ... I was in the worst class ... but then at the same time it was like well I can't be that bad, I'm in the accelerate math class ... and then I remember ... I was so excited, I got second at something ... it was like oh my god. I was so happy ... it's like yes, second accelerate.”*

(Young adult H)

While it was widely agreed that being acknowledged in the public arena for some accomplishment built confidence, for some young adults it was the private, unsolicited,

and unexpected acknowledgement that had an even extra confidence building ingredient.

*“At prize giving when I got a trophy the Principal said some really nice things about me and that was nice, but ... he’s talking in front of a whole group of people, he’s got to say something nice about me ... that was ... humbling but it ... didn’t build my confidence hugely, but afterwards a teacher ... who I haven’t even spoken to in a year coming up to me and just saying all these really nice humbling things about me that...really made me kinda shut up and gain some confidence ... he doesn’t teach me anything now. He had no reason to even come up and talk to me ... that really gave me a lot of confidence.”* (Young adult L)

*“The most important thing, when someone can say in front of an audience your accomplishments and how well you’ve done and what they think of you, but at the same time come up to you later on or afterwards, or ... later on in your life when you don’t even remember them and say ‘I still remember you because you did this’ ... it makes you think, so that’s actually something that I can say about myself, cause someone else thinks that as well.”* (Young adult N)

The recognition and acknowledgement of success was considered so essential by some of the young adults they proposed that success without some form of acknowledgement could have the reverse effect, in that it could lower a person’s confidence.

*“Acknowledgement of achievement is a really big confidence builder ... If you’ve done something and nobody notices and you start to think ‘well, was that actually worth it?’ ... cause ... if you’re doing something new, you don’t know how to do it, and then you do it and nobody says anything ... then you’re not actually sure whether you did it right or how well you did it.”* (Young adult F)

Having discussed the contribution that success can have on building confidence, and the extra impact of acknowledging that success, the next general factor identified is young adults having the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills.

## Sharing knowledge and skills

A few of the research participants shared how being recognised and approached as a person who had something authentically valuable to offer (be that knowledge or skill) was a builder of confidence. This suggested that mentoring / coaching was not only beneficial to those being mentored / instructed, but was also a confidence builder for those doing the mentoring / instructing.

*“I think when someone comes to you and asks you for help at something that you thought you weren’t good at and they ... acknowledge that you’re actually good at it and it’s like oh ... wow ... I didn’t know I could do that. It always makes you feel good and ... it helps with your confidence.”* (Young adult K)

The seventh general factor to be discussed is the impact, from the research participants perspective, that observing others has had on building their confidence.

## Observing other's decisions (both constructive and destructive) and life journeys.

Some young adults in both groups shared that they learnt a lot from watching others. This assisted them in clarifying their own positioning, including who they were as a person, their beliefs, their values, and their aspirations, all of which enhanced personal clarity and built confidence. These observations included watching some people succeed and thinking ‘I can do that’, watching some people struggle through some tough times and thinking ‘if they can do it, so can I’, and observing others make (according to them) some poor decisions and thus providing some insight and clarification on how they do not want to be.

*“I think learning from other people’s experiences ... you see what other people have been through, and see that they’ve made it through, so then you get confidence of what you’re doing.”* (Young adult A)

*“Especially for me ... learning from other people’s experience, that’s probably the biggest thing I’ve got from my family to do with confidence, is seeing what has*



*happened to my family ... not wanting to turn out that way is quite a huge thing.”*

(Young adult A)

A few young adults commented that being part of families where parents and / or extended families had parted company (or ‘broken families’ as one participant described it) meant that they had experienced multiple socio-economic circumstances. Having personal experience of the contrast between differing socio-economic situations, and the impact this had on lifestyle choices, did prove a highly motivating factor towards achieving success for some, which of itself inter-connected with confidence.

*“My Mum ... divorced with my Dad ... she had three kids by the time she was twenty one and we moved to ... she had absolutely no qualifications and so she was looking after three small children and worked to get her first degree in teaching and then she went on to university. So she ... found it really, really hard, we started off really poor. We were living with my Aunty, and she was supporting us and then she had to work really hard to make her way up ... I don't want to have the life that my Dad has now cause like, my parents have gone in completely different directions and I want to follow the way that my Mum has gone, and not have to struggle the way that my Dad has.”* (Young adult K)

The next part of the findings discusses the thoughts that young adults shared when they reflected on the contribution that their ethnicity had on building their confidence.

## Ethnicity

At the start of both focus groups the young adults were asked to state their age, gender and ethnicity. When collating the data from the sixteen participants ten different categories were given for ethnicity. These included five New Zealand European, one New Zealand Pākeha, one New Zealand Māori, two New Zealander, one Māori/New Zealand European, one Māori/Pākeha, one Māori, one Pākeha, one Arabic, one Samoan and one British. When looking at this data it became apparent that eight (50%) of the participants used an ethnic based term (including Māori, Pākeha, Samoan and Arabic) when identifying their ethnicity, while the other half used arguably nationality and geographically located terms including New Zealander, New Zealand European, and

British (Liu, McCreanor, McIntosh & Teaiwa, 2005). This raised a question around the understanding, meaning and interpretations that young adults gave to the concepts of 'ethnicity' and 'nationality'.

During the course of the focus group discussions five of the participants (31%) shared that either they themselves were migrants, or they were children of migrants from a variety of countries, including England, Samoa, Uruguay, Ireland, and Arabia. When the participants were asked to self-identify ethnicity (as discussed above) British, Arabia and Samoa were mentioned, but no mention was made of Ireland or Uruguay. However, this information suggested that although this study was based in provincial New Zealand, multiple ethnicity based influences were represented.

One of the unique factors in building confidence that some (although not all) of the Māori participants highlighted related to their strong sense of belonging to a wider extended family and ethnicity based community. Aspects like whakapapa, kāupapa, mārae, whānau, te reo, and wāiata were discussed as being integral factors to this sense of belonging (refer also to page 88 of this report).

*“As a ... Māori ... I think it's a lot with my family and going, really going back to our mārae ... I don't always get acknowledged as a Māori because I am white, but then as soon as they hear my whakapapa and background ... and sing actually... they get gobsmacked, and you know then I'm more acknowledged ... Having... a huge confidence in myself and, believing, yes I am Māori ... I don't care what they think ... I think there's a huge confidence in that. In knowing what you really are.” (Young adult D)*

One of the research participants commented that at times all it took was a simple acknowledgement of being Māori by other Māori that created a sense of whānau, and with that came a confidence in a sense of belonging.

*“Māori as a community ... is really whānua orientated, family orientated, and that again, just like family, helps boost you ... say I'm 18 ... I go up to the pubs and then there's some Māoris standing there, and they see me and it's like 'Cheer*

*Bro'... then that just gives you a bit of confidence in yourself... people out there that will talk to you.*" (Young adult E)

This notion of a supportive extended family and a sense of belonging was also mentioned as a confidence builder by young adults who self-identified as either New Zealand European, or Pākeha, even when part of their family lived overseas.

*"For our family Mum has, there's five siblings, and Dad's got four, so it's not the biggest family but it's biggish, and like ... how tight they are ... it's like having several mothers and fathers, in a weird kind of way ... like one of my cousins, seriously like just went off the rails, and was having a really hard time so he came and just lived with us for a few years, and Mum and Dad sorted him out and got him back on track and then he went back home and ... if anything was ever wrong you've always got someone else and family is just such a huge thing for us."* (Young adult H)

*"A close knit family no matter how far apart they are ... for instance, prize giving last night ... I can guarantee you that my Uncle in Italy knows what I got ... by today ... because my Mum would've texted Aunty ... in Auckland and she would've emailed Uncle ... about two seconds after she found out so my whole family knows, no matter where they are, and they're all probably going to send emails to us ... sort of congratulating ... and it's a huge confidence builder to know that you've got those people no matter where they are, who have you in the back of their mind, and that they care."* (Young adult F)

A Samoan participant highlighted that their personal achievements were seen as a reflection on their entire extended family, and the desire to bring pride and happiness to everyone else gave them motivation and determination. This foundation was a driver to achieve success, which in turn enhanced confidence.

*"I come from a family that struggles with education, like struggles with heaps of stuff... I keep telling myself like ... I'll do it for them ... I'll do it for myself, but ... it's for them as well ... you just don't think of yourself at all times, you gotta think of other people that will get affected."* (Young adult P)

Many participants were able to link their family / nationality / ethnicity of origin with expectations around the importance (or otherwise) of academic success. While for most of the young adults academic success was undoubtedly applauded by their families, two of the young adults shared that their families academic expectations relaxed when they migrated to New Zealand, and this gave them confidence to expand their options. Another young adult mentioned that their migrant family placed more value on being a positive role model than academic grades, while a fourth young adult shared that for their family academic achievement was perceived as being an undesirable thing that detracted from 'real' work. This scenario encouraged them to clarify their individual aspirations, which in turn built their self belief and gave them confidence to follow their own path.

*“The UK and New Zealand are not too different ethnicity wise but ... I got into a good school and the deal was you go to the good school you get GCSE, you get A level you go to university, and all the subjects you choose are academic subjects ... I move over here and like, I had the same mindset, and I didn't realise that the school didn't ... that approach to doing what you're good at and not what you're expected to be good at, and letting you choose the subjects ... I would've probably ended up working in the IT industry back in the UK ... and like now I'm not going to university, I probably will one day, but I'm not expected to go that way.”* (Young adult L)

*“The Arabic culture is like way different ... the academic is the most important thing, they don't care about sport, or anything ... like my parents were brought up that way ... So I put all my energy into that ... but later we started to ... develop ... the culture more, the New Zealand culture ... and you realise that it's ... important to be balanced.”* (Young adult J)

*“It is like a struggle for Islanders to come in this country and learn a new country and don't know how things work and you gotta learn heaps of things ... Islanders ... they have different expectations from the European ... they don't think of like marks and stuff ... they just want you to succeed in life ... it's a success ... to be a good role model.”* (Young adult P)

*“New Zealand farming kind of syndrome which ... I don't think it's always good, because it does devalue achievements that are academic as opposed to like ... my cousin just dropped out of school and got a farming job and they are like 'whoa' they're so stoked about it ... and whereas I'm like ... oh, cool, I got this and they're like 'oh...well'.”*

(Young adult G)

Having explored the theme of 'building confidence in self', the next theme presented in these findings relates to the young adults thoughts around building confidence in others.

## **Section C: Theme - 'Building confidence in others'**

Using a question guideline the third theme that was explored in the focus group discussions was 'building confidence in others' (see Appendix Eight). As a part of this exploration the young adults were encouraged to reflect upon their own insights, experiences, and understandings around building confidence, and translate that into advice for others who worked with young people. Combining the comments from the two focus groups ten suggestions were identified, including listen unconditionally, stay authentic, empathize with the age and stage of young adults, maintain respect, have a genuine belief, faith, and trust in young people, pro-actively encourage young adults to 'give it a go', acknowledge and celebrate achievement, be inclusive, believe that you can make a difference, and provide constructive feedback. Each of these suggestions is re-visited in more detail below, with no one being more important than the other.

### **Listen unconditionally**

The notion of unconditional listening was mentioned in both groups by many of the research participants as being a crucial factor if young people were to have a sense of being 'heard'.

*“I've actually got out of a lot of roles just for that reason, that you know ... they say they're youth led, but really it's just adults telling youth what to do, and I think a big part of it is they don't actually listen to what the youth need and what the youth want.”* (Young adult A)

*“That’s a big one for me, you’ve got to listen and, not even understand, but you’ve just got to listen.”* (Young adult E)

As a part of unconditional listening were suggestions around being open, non judgmental, and not imposing of an adults frame of reference.

*“Like, don’t expect yourself ... like you know what their problem is ... it might be different and stuff ... you might be the big boss, like you’ve trained and you’ve studied it, but just let them kinda let it out, like let them tell you.”*

(Young adult P)

*“Another thing also is not coming to judgments, like so many adults will just come to judgments like, I wear eyeliner so I’m just this huge rebel, like I’ve got that so many times and it is so stupid.”* (Young adult A)

One research participant believed that unconditional listening was not the same as being naïve, and that tolerating unnecessary abuse was not useful.

*“Listen to the kids but don’t take shit ... a lot of the time people have stuff going on you have no idea about ... I think a lot of the time people who are really unconfident just need someone to talk to ... listen to them but don’t ... allow them to sit there and lie and abuse you.”* (Young adult L)

The next quite specific recommendation that the research participants had for adults was to stay authentic.

## Stay authentic

A firmly expressed piece of advice from several of the research participants was for adults who worked alongside them to stay authentically themselves. They had experienced adults imitating young people (via things like clothing and the use of language), and this was very off putting for them. They commented that when they

approached an adult it was because of who they were as a person in their own right, regardless of their age or any other factors.

*“When adults try be youthful, I actually hate it ... they’ve got to remember that often we go to adults ... we talk to them because they’re adults.”* (Young adult G)

Some young adults were particularly critical of the school based exercise of personal goal setting during class time (apparently this was an expectation during their primary and intermediate years). These young adults expressed that this was awkward, and trivialised the authenticity of goal setting, suggesting that the adults involved were more concerned with completing the curriculum tick box than a genuine interest in their future directions.

*“It was tragic, it almost puts everyone off setting goals ... like I hated making them up on the spot.”* (Young adult M)

The third identified recommendation which follows relates to connecting with the age and stage of the life journey in which the research participants were currently located.

## Empathise with the age and stage of young adults

Research participants in both groups shared how at times adults did not take into full consideration the pressure of the multiple expectations that they experienced. The various contexts of young adults lives (like home, school, extra-curricular, work, and personal aspirations) were often not inter related, and yet each area had demands which were in competition for their time (and other resources). It seemed that many adults were not aware of these competing demands which, essentially, were being played out at the loci of the individual young adult. This created a sense of failure (and thus was a confidence deflator) when, through pure logistics, the demands from the various contexts were not able to receive their full attention at all times.

*“I hate it when they under estimate sometimes how much pressure you’re under ... also at school, financial, just anything ... you know school is hard for us, and a lot of us are working ... some of us aren’t going to get student allowance next year and have to pay for our eleven thousand dollar hostel, and like so we’ve*

*worked the whole year, we've paid for our history trip, and now I have six months to try and get this money so don't talk to me about my head issues ... And maybe I've had three and a half weeks of exams and maybe I'm a little stressed and I need that sleep in."* (Young adult H)

*"I got frustrated with this teacher... she always said, school came first and I'm like, but we have other ambitions, we have other things we want to do you know, and sometimes you've got to work for that as well".* (Young adult D)

The next piece of advice for adults related to maintaining respect.

## Maintain respect

Mutual respect was mentioned as a key ingredient for adults to remember as they worked towards enhancing confidence in others. Research participants were able to give quite specific examples of incidents which for them represented moments when they felt disrespected, and this confidence deflator was particularly acute when it occurred in front of others. As a part of this, respect for confidentiality, respect for each person's right to have their own ideas, dreams and aspirations, and respect for others' integrity and mana were mentioned.

*"I think adults shouldn't put down young people's ideas either. Sometimes they think that their idea is best and they have to be open to different ideas, and also I think if they do have an issue with what you are wanting to do... they should bring it up with you, not in front of people, cause that's a complete confidence deflation ... I think that some adults kind of overlook the importance of what you say in front of people."* (Young adult A)

*"He treats everyone like a person ... he treats everyone like an equal without losing the authority he has in the class."* (Young adult L)

The fifth piece of advice related to having a genuine belief, faith, and trust in the young adult. This connects with findings already shared under the theme of 'building confidence in self' when the research participants discussed the positive impact that



having someone unconditionally support, encourage and believe in them had on their confidence.

## **Have a genuine belief, faith, and trust in the young adult**

During the focus group discussions many of the research participants shared how having someone else believe in them, trust in them, and have faith in them, contributed greatly to their self confidence, so it was no surprise that this came up again when they were asked if they had any advice for adults. It seemed that having at least one person who genuinely believed in the 'goodness', 'wisdom' and 'capability' of a young adult provided quite a powerful and foundational confidence builder for them, or in the absence of this, a confidence deflator.

*"Just knowing you're believed in ... cause generally we are quite believed in."*

(Young adult B)

*"You need to have belief in everyone no matter what background they've had, like everyone can change, I think everyone has potential."* (Young adult O)

The next piece of advice discussed below connected with young adults 'giving it a go' as has already been discussed above under the theme of 'building confidence in self', in that it related to adults enabling and encouraging this to happen.

## **Pro-actively encourage young adults to 'give it a go'**

Encouraging and enabling young adults to 'give it a go' was seen as a positive thing, regardless of the challenge or the context, since this supported young adults to gain a wide range of experiences which in turn enabled them to discover their strengths and weaknesses along with their passions.

*"We wouldn't have probably taken up some of these opportunities if we hadn't been encouraged by our parents to do them or if we hadn't been*

*encouraged by our teachers ... to sort of have a go ... so yeah, adults need to encourage ... children to have a go at things, to sort of get involved."*

(Young adult F)

Under the last theme of 'building confidence in self' the significance of acknowledging success was discussed as a contributor to confidence. When asked for advice for adults both groups re-iterated this quite specifically, so it has been re-stated below.

## **Acknowledge and celebrate achievement**

From the research participants perspective acknowledging and celebrating success was a powerful confidence builder, whatever scale that achievement might be. This could be a public acknowledgement, or it could be done privately, but the absence of any recognition was a potential confidence deflator.

*"They need to acknowledge the achievements ... no matter what they are ... whether it's that they learn to read or ... that they got the first place in a running race or whatever it doesn't matter what it is, you need to acknowledge the achievement."* (Young adult F)

As an addendum to this acknowledgement of achievement, remembering (and spelling) peoples names was discussed as being really important. Forgetting names and mis-spelt names brought into question the authenticity of the acknowledgement. The next piece of advice that the research participants gave was to be inclusive.

## **Be inclusive**

According to the young adults a powerful strategy for building confidence was for adults to proactively be inclusive of all people. It was this genuine inclusion that enhanced opportunity, and empowered young adults to get involved.

*"I think the ability to be open ... to anyone ... whatever personalities, ethnicity ... is something that the greatest teachers have, they can sit there and they can have a student that is so great and ... then they can turn to someone who's not doing so*

*well and they can say 'What can I do to help you?', or 'This is something that I think you could really improve on and you could make better, and this is how you can get to that next level'.*” (Young adult N)

*“[Named teacher] made the ... kid or whatever feel important and kept ... using their name ... including them ... say in a class ... not just ... focusing on the bright students or whatever, but talking to everyone, asking questions to people like, at the back or something, just like making everyone feel just as important.”*

(Young adult J)

The ninth piece of advice to be shared below was for adults to firmly believe that they can make a difference.

## Believe that you can make a difference

Throughout the focus group discussions it became apparent that adults (particularly parents and teachers) had an impact (both in the positive and the negative) on the building of confidence in young people, whether they intended to or not. When it came to giving adults advice the research participants highlighted this point, and noted that it just came with the territory of being an adult in their lives. Within this sits two significant points, the first is to take responsibility for the impact you might have, and second was to genuinely believe that you can make a difference (and thus take responsibility for the impact you might have).

*“Especially when we are making big decisions about our futures and like anything anyone says, especially teachers ... what they say is quite important to us, like even if we don't like them it's probably quite important to us.”*

(Young adult G)

*“After prize giving Mr ... came up to me and gave me the hugest hug ever and he goes 'I'm really proud of you, you deserved everything and all the teachers are proud of you' and I'm like 'thank you, thank you' I didn't know what to say because I've never had him as a teacher and I've never talked to him, like he's a science teacher ... I don't do science.”* (Young adult P)

The last piece of advice by the research participants to be mentioned in these findings was for adults to provide constructive feedback.

## Provide constructive feedback

During the reflective conversation on advice for adults some young adults mentioned how much they valued constructive feedback. For them when adults (including teachers and parents) said that something was ‘good’, or something was ‘bad’, this was not particularly useful feedback, and didn’t assist much in building confidence. They much preferred it if more specific information to back up the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ comment was provided since this then enabled them to gain clarification, which in turn provided some guidance and insight as to how they could improve and thus develop their potential, which in turn built confidence.

*“It’s really frustrating when a teacher will give you back a mark and they’re like oh ... merit plus, this is almost an excellence, but they don’t tell you how to get there. Like ... they should be able to show you ways to develop, to get that extra mark you wanted.”* (Young adult K)

*“There’s nothing worse than having a teacher that says that’s brilliant and then doesn’t say anything ... we’ve had a really cool ... teacher this year because ... he told us where we should be going.”* (Young adult M)

This chapter presented the findings under the three themes of ‘the concept of confidence’, ‘building confidence in self’ and ‘building confidence in others’. Presenting the data in this way enabled it to follow the flow of ideas that occurred during the focus group discussions (see Appendix Eight). This was done purposefully so that the research participants could reflect on their own perceptions on the ‘concept of confidence’ while hearing others’ interpretations, as a foundational step towards identifying and clarifying some sense of a shared meaning before moving on to the discussions around ‘building confidence in self’ and ‘building confidence in others’. Having said that, the ‘concept of confidence’ was re-visited several times throughout

the focus group discussions as the cyclic and integrated evolution of a shared meaning occurred. The next chapter discusses the findings and offers some recommendations before ending with recommendations and a concluding statement.

# Chapter Seven

## Discussion and Conclusion

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### Introduction

*“Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending”*

(Bard, as cited in Weld and Appleton, 2008, p.34).

In this research project successful young adults were asked –‘In your experience, what builds confidence?’ Focus group discussions were used to hear the experiences and insights of Year 13 students with regards to the concept of ‘confidence’, and what they believed contributed to ‘building confidence’, both in themselves and in others.

This Chapter begins by discussing the perceptions, interpretations, and meanings that young adults gave to the concept of ‘confidence’. This is followed with their insights around ‘building confidence in self’, and a discussion they had when asked if they had any advice for adults interested in ‘building confidence in others’. This chapter continues by identifying some implications of the findings, followed with some limitations that became apparent during this research project. Lastly recommendations that include future research possibilities are proposed. The conclusion completes this research study.

### Discussion

In the literature review the concept of ‘confidence’ was associated with the feeling words of ‘trust’, ‘freedom from doubt’, ‘control’, ‘toleration’, and ‘self-belief’ (Pearsall, 1998; Cotterell et al, 2006; Aoina, 2006; Ginsberg, 2006, cited in Engler,

2007; Craig, 2007; Merton, 1968, cited in Judge & Hurst, 2008). In contrast, the participants in this study invariably linked 'confidence' with the feeling words of 'comfortable', 'warm', 'happy', 'self-love', 'complete', 'proud', and 'special'. It could be argued that these feeling words were more relaxed, more centered within the individual, and less relational to others than those identified in the literature. Several factors may have influenced this, like the age of the research participants, or perhaps because this study was located within the context of a provincial New Zealand community. An assumption that underpinned the research question in this study was that being in a leadership role, and/or being identified as being 'successful' (both of which are relational) in a school based context provided explicit indicators of confidence. While these indicators may be relevant, they were not at the top of the list from the perspective of the young adults. For them indicators of confidence were more low key, less publically identifiable, and included things like having a clear sense of direction, positive core self-evaluations (including self-belief), self-awareness, and competent interpersonal communication skills.

The feeling based words the young adults attached to 'confidence', and the indicators they associated with 'confidence', were not talked about as if they were mutually exclusive, but rather that they were inter-connected. As an outcome of the wisdoms shared by the research participants the researcher proposes an emergent definition of 'confidence', namely that **'confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others'**. The key components of this definition include 'self-knowledge', 'self pride', and 'being able to portray who you are to others'.

'Self-knowledge' as a component of 'confidence' appeared frequently in the literature (Cotterell et al, 2006). Self-pride was not so apparent in the literature although it could be argued that this overlapped with the concept of 'self-belief' which did feature (Cotterell et al, 2006; Aoina, 2006; Ginsberg, 2006, cited in Engler, 2007; Craig, 2007), and was mentioned several times by many of the young adults involved in this research. Both 'self-knowledge' and 'self-pride' resonate with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and are located at the microsystem layer of the ecological framework. The third component of the above definition namely, 'being able to portray who you are to others', was not particularly evident in the

literature. Aoina (2006) asserted that speaking out in public was a sign of confidence while Craig (2007) talked about the confident loner who preferred a low profile. The significance of this component of the definition relates to being able to congruently and effectively (from the young adults perspective) portray oneself in multiple situations. While this may be perceived as relational (in that communication is not just about the message being sent, but is also about how that message is being received), 'being able to portray who you are to others' was not seen by some of the research participants as being dependent on how the message was received. But rather, that they had the confidence to speak out. Having noted that, portraying oneself to others is impacted upon by a multitude of factors located within all layers of the ecological framework. Politics, culture, religion and socio-economic status are but some of the contributors to the environment in which the portrayal of oneself is occurring (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Gauvin & Cole, 1993; Lerner, 2005) as Deen (2003) demonstrated in her narrative included on page 38 of this report.

Two components of 'confidence' that did appear in the literature review but did not feature significantly within these research findings were 'wealth, power and control' (Turner & Stets, 2005) and 'the ability to change' (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). On analysis and reflection it is not clear what to make of this. Maybe indicators of confidence develop and alter over the lifespan, in that wealth, power and control, and perhaps the ability to change, may resonate more as the young adults get older and engage in life beyond their high school years. This discussion now explores what the research participants believed contributed to their self-confidence.

A few research participants could not remember when they did not have confidence. It seemed for them 'confidence' was embedded earlier on in their developmental journey (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007), and from this came a cycle, or perhaps a trajectory (see page 17 of this report) of 'confidence building'. However most were able to clearly articulate factors they believed contributed to their 'confidence'. This study found that from the young adults perspective social cognitive processes played a huge part in this. In support of the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) it seemed that an internal voice which came from a positioning of self-belief enhanced their confidence as they perceived, interpreted, and responded to the world around them. These positive core self-evaluations (Judge & Hurst, 2007) empowered them



to take advantage of (and seek out) a wide range of opportunities and was driven not only by their desire to experience success, but also with the conscious aim of gaining further insight and clarity around personal abilities and interests, and as a mechanism for socialisation. Increasing their social capital (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003) enhanced their ability to ‘capitalize’ (Judge & Hurst, 2007, p.1212) on situations by capturing benefits beyond their initial possibilities, which in turn fueled a sense of self determination and empowerment. An interesting revelation shared by the research participants was that many of them proactively and consciously influenced these internal processes. In other words it wasn’t always automatic. They were aware of the power that self-talk had with regards to how they perceived things, and were able to articulate examples where they both focused their attention on the positive and bolstered their self-belief, which in turn strengthened their resolve (and confidence) as they interacted with the world around them. These findings are supported by Peterson et al (2008, p.343) who assert that having a positive attitude can be learned, and Fredrickson and Joiner (2002; p.172) who assert that positive emotions contribute to an upward spiral of overall emotional wellbeing. Cobb (2007) illustrated this upward spiral of emotional wellbeing in his comment that

Adolescents with high self-images are better adjusted: They are more reflective, do better in school, tolerate frustration better, and are more resilient to stress ... how positive adolescents feel about themselves affects the quality of their relationships with others. As the quality of their relationships improve, these improved relationships contribute to even more positive feelings about themselves.

(Cobb, 2007, p.249).

While confidence contributed to healthy relationships (Cobb, 2007) competent interpersonal communication skills were identified by the young adults both as an indicator of, and an enhancer of, confidence, both in self and in others. To be able to ‘connect’ with a wide range of people, ‘hear’ divergent views and be inclusive, while also having the skills to effectively and consistently articulate one’s own point of view, was mentioned several times. This did not necessarily need to be in a loud or gregarious manner and could equally occur quietly and discreetly. The essential message was that from the research participants’ viewpoint confident people were

also competent communicators. This linked with human capital theory (MacKay, 2003) in that not only was interpersonal communication seen to be an individual skill, but it was also perceived to be a valued skill within the community in which the young adults were located.

The findings from this study suggested that having a sense of being safe increased confidence, although the stories varied as to whether it was the confident persona that protected them from adversity, or that being in a safe environment built confidence. Whatever came first, this study linked to social cohesion theory which proposes that confidence was enhanced when people developed a deep seated sense of security in the knowledge that they were safe and protected (Ginsberg, 2006, as cited in Engler, 2007). The most specific examples in this study came from two young men who, from the researcher's perspective, actually seemed quite physically strong. One young man shared how at another school just walking across the field posed a physical threat as there was a real possibility other guys might take him on for being on 'their turf'. It seemed for these young men being at a school that was predominantly free from physical intimidation enabled them to relax and gave them confidence to focus on the opportunities that were available. These findings reflected sentiments of a young mum (Lenihan, cited in Chapman, 2009, p. D3) who shared that the safety provided by a home for teen parents enabled her to focus on the task of up-skilling (see page 13 of this report). These findings were also reflected in the thoughts shared by the cultural advisors who identified a safe environment as being a factor that built confidence within a school context (see Appendix Nine).

The findings in this research project reinforced the well documented belief that family provided the crucial foundational location for unconditional support, belief, and encouragement (Berk, 2005, Lauzière, 2006; Watson & Denny, 2006, p. 156) which, according to the young adults, contributed to their confidence. Having said that, the degree to which this occurred was not the same for all of the research participants. While many reflected this sentiment, some young adults also experienced their families to have what they perceived to be unrealistic expectations, high demands, and dismissive attitudes with regards to their hopes and aspirations. Some experienced their families to lack a degree of authenticity when it came to being supportive, in that from their perspective their family gave them positive

feedback when they themselves believed this wasn't deserved. The outcome of this for these young adults was that while they appreciated the loving intent, they hesitated when it came to believing their family, and thus sought out other adults in an endeavor to get what they considered to be more honest, and from their point of view constructive feedback. Several young adults clearly articulated other meaningful locations (including teachers and adults involved in their extra curricula activities) in which they both sought out, and received unconditional support, belief, and encouragement. This provided another example of pro-actively extending their social capital (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003) in that they increased the circle of social relationships which they could draw on when seeking opportunities (Mackay, 2003). The notion of unconditional support, belief and encouragement demonstrated a degree of social cohesion, in that many of the young adults shared their understanding that if they took a risk and fell over someone would be there to support them (Bruhn, 2005). In their research Sanders and Munford (2008) found that positive relationships, including caring and support, had a more significant impact than risk factors on positive outcomes for young people.

The young adults reflected the literature (Durie, 1998; Berk, 2005; Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007), and the sentiments shared by the cultural advisors (see Appendix Nine) in their belief that having a clear sense of self-identity, along with a sense of belonging, contributed to building their confidence, although there was much variation in the detail. This sense of belonging included to a family (and extended family), an ethnic community (see page 42 of this report), a spiritual based community, an activities based community (like a drama community, a school community, or a kapa haka community), a work based community, and more informal groups (like a peer or friendship group). Many of the participants identified multiple places where they had this sense of belonging. One finding of interest was the significance that a couple of the research participants placed on having some degree of congruency between their self-identity and their perceived place of belonging. When there was not at least some sense of congruency (from the perspective of the research participants) a level of confusion and discomfort seemed to exist. As one young adult put it, being 'a fish out of water' undermined their confidence. This was not the same as not being part of a group or a community, but rather related to being immersed in a context (like school, community, family, peer

group, activity based group) that did not sit comfortably with their beliefs, values, and/or interests. Hence, the positioning did not seem so much as being an ‘outsider’, but rather a ‘mis-matched insider’. When the young adults shared these stories there was an almost audible sigh of relief as they talked about how they moved from the context in which they did not have a sense of an affinity, to a community and context in which they did. This links to the fifth stage of Erikson’s developmental based psychosocial theory which unfolds during adolescence (see page 28 of this report), namely the evolution of identity versus identity confusion (Heaven, 2001).

The findings of this research study affirmed the value that being chosen as a leader and a mentor had on the development of a young adult’s positive self-identity and confidence (Heaven, 2001; Ministry of Youth Development, 2009). The fact that they had been singled out was, for them, a public acknowledgement that they had something worthwhile to contribute, along with the recognition that they were trusted and valued. This factor also linked to findings discussed in more detail below with regards to the value of experiencing a wide range of opportunities, in that this assisted the young adult to clarify their skills and passions. Of interest here was the perceived shortfall in opportunities within the school context to step up into leadership and mentoring roles. There was a genuine appreciation expressed by some young adults from one school who shared how roles that matched their interests and capabilities had been specifically developed as a one off for them within their school community. This group mentioned that being given this opportunity was a definite boost to their confidence. Their story suggested that while maintaining the set format for leadership within a school (for example, head girl and sports captain) there could also be some merit in developing other potential leadership and mentoring roles that embraced the talents and expertise of other young adults. Along with this it was clear that the research participants themselves observed and learnt from adult role models (both positive and negative) both from within their families and communities, and within the public arena. It seemed that watching how adults conducted themselves increased their own self-awareness with regards to their personal aspirations, values, priorities, and the behaviours they considered to be appropriate (and inappropriate).

This study clearly found that providing young adults with a wide range of experiences and opportunities at a variety of levels supported the building of self-

confidence. The research participants gave several interconnecting reasons for this. First, opportunities provided a vehicle through which they could learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses, and increase their insight with regards to what they enjoyed along with identifying any real passions they may have. This supported the process of refining with participants working out where they might like to focus their energies, what they might like to aspire towards, which in turn provided some sense of future direction. As a part of this process the young adults also gained some clarity as to what they did not enjoy and where they did not have aspirations. Stories shared by the young adults in this study indicated that developing a skill which did not resonate with their interests and passions could actually undermine their confidence in the longer term. Apart from detracting from more meaningful pursuits, it seems that eventually even the naturally talented young adult was surpassed by others who did resonate with a particular skill and thus were more engaged and motivated to practice. Having clarified this, the findings did support Aoina (2006) who asserted that opportunities in the young person's area of interest, or even in an area which could be classified as passion and interest neutral, built confidence. This occurred through the provision of challenges that extended them, broadened their horizons, perhaps pushed them outside their comfort zone, increased their personal insight and their likelihood of experiencing success. Being involved in a wide range of activities increased the amount of experiences from which a young adult could refer to with the notion that previous experience provided useful insight and information when tackling a similar experience in the future. This linked with the research participants self perception of robustness and resilience. Knowing that they had found a pathway through something came the belief that they could do it again. This enhanced their confidence (Goldstein, 2002). This connection between experience and resilience has been well documented in the literature (Merton, 1968; Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Ungar, 2008).

According to the research participants another reason a wide range of opportunities enhanced their confidence was because this provided a vehicle through which they socialised and got to know others whom they may not ordinarily have come into contact with. This gave them experiences with people from various cultures, ages, and socio-economic positioning and thus increased their knowledge of diverse

communities, extended their potential friendship group, and increased their social capital (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003).

There was much debate and a range of opinions from the young adults involved in this study with regard to the place that innate ability, as a human capital in its own right (Mackay, 2003), had on success (and building confidence). Some believed that innate ability without hard work and practice was of little value, while others argued that hard work and practice without innate ability had limitations. It seemed that the perceived relationship between innate ability, hard work and practice, and success varied amongst the research participants, although there was general agreement that success of itself was very much a confidence builder, no matter what the ‘success’ entailed. Having said that, it was surprising to learn the extra impact that acknowledgement and recognition of success had on confidence. Whether this was in the public arena, or in a private and low key manner, the important thing was that success and achievement was acknowledged by someone, and preferably someone with whom the young adult had some respect. Some of the most heartwarming stories shared by the research participants related to teachers quietly, unexpectedly, and authentically congratulating them for an achievement sometimes months and even years after the event. Just the reality that the success was noticed, and that the joy of this success was authentically shared by someone else, seemed to make all the difference. Having discussed the components, many of which were interconnected, that young adults believed contributed to the building of their confidence, the discussion now shifts to the suggestions they gave when asked if they had any advice for adults who wished to build confidence in others (particularly children and adolescents).

On the whole the research participants had very clear ideas and were most forthcoming when asked for their advice around building confidence in others. Ten suggestions to which there seemed to be a general consensus emerged.

Unsurprisingly many of these suggestions interfaced with the components for building self-confidence mentioned above. These ten pieces of advice are outlined below.

The first piece of advice the research participants had for adults was to listen unconditionally, and to not impose their own frame of reference. The next suggestion related to adults not trying to be 'youthy' by imitating the clothes, language, and behaviours of the children and young adults whose confidence they were trying to build. A small group of the research participants were quite vocal in voicing how irritating they found this, with the message being that if they engaged with an adult it was because of the value they saw in that adult, as an adult, and not as an aging 'youth'. The third piece of advice was to be cognisant of the age and stage of children and adolescents. Within this was a particular reference to the multitude of separate and often competing demands (like school, work, friends, family, and extra-curricular activities) that young adults in particular were juggling. The next piece of advice provided by the research participants was to be consistently respectful when interacting with them. Having a genuine belief, faith and trust in the child or adolescent was another piece of advice given by the young adults. This interfaced with the 'unconditional support, belief and encouragement' which has already been discussed as a component that contributed to building self-confidence.

The sixth piece of advice offered to adults by the research participants was to pro-actively encourage children and adolescents to 'give things a go'. This also interfaces with building self-confidence in young adults, particularly the components that involved having a wide range of experiences and opportunities. The seventh piece of advice was to acknowledge and celebrate achievement no matter how big or small. The impact of this has already been covered in the discussion above on building self-confidence. The next suggestion identified was that being pro-actively inclusive in all contexts was a key ingredient for building confidence in others. The ninth piece of advice for adults was for them to genuinely believe that they can make a difference. This came with a cautionary note in that it was identified that adults can make a difference either positively or negatively, and that they need to both remember, and take responsibility for this. The last piece of advice which was made quite strongly (particularly from several young adults in one group) was for adults to provide constructive criticism. To say something was 'good' or 'bad' was of itself not particularly useful to them, in that those comments gave little insight or guidance on how to improve. On the other hand clear constructive criticism that was informative was considered to be empowering in that it enabled children and

adolescents to learn and move forward which, from their perspective, built confidence. Many of the suggestions mentioned above were also apparent in the information collected from the cultural advisors (see Appendix Nine) and can be linked with Erickson's developmentally based psychosocial theory (Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007) along with resilience and strength based perspectives (Ungar, 2008; Saleeby, 2002). Having said that, the advice given by the research participants resonates particularly with human capital theory and social capital theory (Mackay, 2003) in that young adults have a vested interest in, and are impacted upon by, the interdependent and dynamic relationships they have with adults. The discussion now shifts focus to some of the implications apparent in this research project.

## **Research Implications**

The first implication arising from this study relates to the discovery that the research participants were willing, capable, and insightful when it came to exploring their understanding of 'confidence'. Informatively they identified a multitude of pragmatically simple, achievable, and accessible strategies at the microsystem and mesosystem layers of the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; ) for 'building confidence' both in themselves and in others. This finding affirms many writers who propose that adults can learn a lot through listening to the voices of our young people (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p.170; Kay, 2008, p. 11; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009).

Another implication from this study relates to the interactive nature of the focus group discussions used for the data collection phase of this research. This process seemed to encourage and assist the research participants to reflect on and integrate their personal experiences as they explored the perceptions and interpretations they gave to the concept of 'confidence' and 'building confidence' (in themselves and others). Through this the young adults may well have increased their awareness and knowledge on this topic, which in turn may be useful if they were to ever either work alongside children and young people, or ever become parents.

The next implication from this research relates to the assumption that researchers and their thoughtfully planned out research design can control confidentiality. This



academic-centered perspective does not take into account that potential research participants themselves also contribute to the maintenance (or otherwise) of confidentiality. In the case of this study some of the potential research participants had talked amongst their peer group and texted people in their network (including one who shared the same surname as the researcher) and had thus already established to a noticeable degree information about the identity of other prospective participants before the data collection phase (the focus group discussion) occurred. It seems that confidentiality about potential research participants was not solely in the researchers control, and that modern technologies (like cell phones) enabled potential participants to do their own research, including research on the researcher.

The last implication of this study to be discussed here relates to the proposal that people are not isolated individuals, but rather they are part of interdependent and dynamic relationships within a wide range of contexts (Chambers, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Durie, 1994; Gauvin & Cole, 1993). Cultural, environmental, economic and other societal and global issues all impact on the individual (Ungar, 2008; Saleeby, 2002; Coady & Lechman, 2008). While the findings of this study did not address the impact of broader societal factors on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Sanders & Munford 2008), it has been proposed that having confidence at the individual level can have an empowering ripple effect outwards through families, communities, and the wider society (Kanter, 2004). This belief was clearly spelt out in The Scottish Governments curriculum for excellence targeting 3 to 18 year olds which states “our aspiration is to enable all children to develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society” (The Scottish Government, 2004, p. 1). The focus now moves to identifying some of the limitations of this research.

## **Research Limitations**

When reflecting on this research journey it became apparent that there were some limitations. The research design of itself required three layers of consent (including the Principal, the Principals delegate, and the cultural advisors) before the young adults themselves could be approached in the first instance. This meant that there was a screening process involving adults who determined if Level 13 students were

to be informed of the study, and which had the option of participating. While this successfully distanced the researcher from the process of participant selection, in hindsight it may have been more inclusive and empowering for the young adults if they were approached directly.

Another limitation became apparent when analysing the data, in that the participants in both groups only occasionally mentioned the contribution that their peer or friendship group had on 'building confidence. This was surprising in line of the abundance of literature that places a great deal of importance on the role of peer and friendship groups in developing identity and a sense of belonging (Berk, 2005; Heaven, 2001; Cobb, 2007). On reflection this was likely to have been influenced by the use of focus group discussions in which the participants came from the same school community. Being aware of this the researcher avoided directly prompting the discussion into the area of friendships and peer groups, a decision she consciously made as she did not wish to instigate any awkwardness. The researcher realized that for the participants to talk about their friends and peer group meant that they would be talking about each other, and also talking about people from outside the group with whom others in the group might be familiar. In hindsight by using very broad and generalist questions the researcher could still have prompted about peer groups and friendships in a way that protected the wellbeing of those involved. Suggestions for future research are discussed next.

## **Recommendations**

Two particular areas for future research have been identified from this study. The first area relates to some exploration of the relationship between confidence and other broader categories in which confidence has often been assumed to be located. In particular, the relationship between 'self- confidence' and categories like self-esteem, self-belief, self-efficacy, and resilience would be of interest. Another area of interest for future research relates to the relationship between ethnicity, identity, and confidence. When asked to identify their ethnicity the sixteen participants in this study responded with (between them) ten different classifications, half of which were arguably nationalities and geographical locations, like New Zealander and New Zealand European, rather than ethnicities like Māori, Pākeha, and Samoan (Liu et al,

2005). Of those young adults who had migrant parents about half included the ethnicity of their migrant parent when identifying their own ethnicity, while the other half solely identified as New Zealander or New Zealand European. There was clearly some shared understanding and appreciation amongst most of the young adults regarding the contribution that Māori had with regards to identity (much of which resonates with the discussion beginning on page 41 of this report), however a shared understanding was not so apparent for the classifications of New Zealander, Pākeha, or New Zealand European. To a degree this reflected the wider New Zealand community in which discussions around the relationship between citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, and identity are continuing (Liu et al, 2005). When reflecting on the central positioning of ethnicity in relation to identity, particularly indigenous identity (Berk, 2005; Durie, 1998), and considering that cultural and ethnic based analyses are consistently in the public and political arena, it may be of benefit to strengthen the capacity of all young adults to locate themselves within this discourse (Callister, Didham & Kivi, 2009). Future research could well provide insight and guidance with regards to this. Next is a recommendation that has come from this research project.

This research study involved the use of interactive focus groups in which the participants were asked to reflect upon, interpret, and give meaning to the concepts of 'confidence' and 'building confidence' (in self and in others). This process seemed to provide an integrated experience for the young adults at a fairly poignant moment in their life journey, namely as they were about to complete their high school years. While this process was likely to have extended the young adults' personal awareness, this 'moment in time' also captured insights that could have some value to staff responsible for making high school relevant, inclusive, and empowering for all. As the researcher I was privileged to hear some of these insights first hand and recognized the potential value in this with regards to providing feedback and guidance for schools. Hence a recommendation from this study is that high schools routinely undertake exit interviews with Level 13 students (see Appendix Ten).

## Conclusion

Drawing from the insights shared by the young adults involved in this research an emergent definition of 'confidence' is proposed, namely that **'confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others'**. The findings did not suggest that there was one shared understanding of 'confidence', nor that there was one linear pathway to 'building confidence', but rather that there were a variety of interconnected components. However there seemed to be a clear shared understanding and agreement among the young adults that 'confidence' as a concept existed in its own right, involved emotion, was an enabler, and was a desirable thing to have. The findings also suggested that confidence can be pro-actively enhanced at the individual, family, and community levels, and that the strategies involved are simple and inexpensive, thus making them achievable.

It has been argued that hearing the perspective of young adults is essential not only for those working alongside them, but also for all those involved in developing programmes or policies that have (or have had) an impact on them (Chambers, 1997; Sanders and Munford 2005; Ministry of Youth Development, 2009). Centrally positioning their perceptions, interpretations and shared meanings shifts the paradigm from young adults as victims to a more empowerment focused and strength based approach whereby young adults become active contributors (International Save the Children Alliance, 2001, p.72; Ministry of Youth Development, 2009; Chambers 1997). Using an ethnographic approach along with constructivist and interpretivist epistemologies reflected this researcher's attempt to bring young adults voices from the private to the public arena, and from the peripheral to a more central positioning. This not only provided a vehicle through which young adults were heard, but also acknowledged their role with regards to the 'ripple out' effect they, as confident young adults, can have on their families, communities, and societies, and as such the contribution they can make towards a healthier world for all.

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## Appendix One

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

### Cultural Advisors Question Guideline

#### General question guidelines for the Cultural Advisors

- How would you identify a 'successful' young adult in this school context?
- How would you identify a 'confident' young adult in this context?
- Is this a culturally safe process for young Māori to be involved in? If not, can it be made culturally safe?
- Any advice about the focus group discussion question guidelines?
- Any advice about the proposed process for this research?
- Any advice about the process of the focus group discussion?
- Any advice about the ground rules?
- Any advice on what to listen out for?
- Any advice on literature that could be relevant for this study?

## Appendix Two

# Information Sheet

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

### **Researcher's Introduction**

My name is Karen Fagan and I am currently completing my Masters in Social Work through Massey University. I am particularly interested in the development of self-confidence, as I believe that self confident young adults are not only more likely to be successful, but also more likely to create opportunities, positively contribute to society, and generally have a full and rewarding adulthood. This research aims to listen to the experiences of successful young adults with the purpose being to gain some insight, from your perspective, on what builds confidence.

### **Project Description and Invitation**

This project involves four different focus group discussions involving Level 13 students from four different co-educational state high schools in provincial New Zealand. These groups will be asked a variety of questions that essentially explore the following two issues :

- 1) What is your definition of 'confidence'?
- 2) In your experience, what builds confidence?

### **Participation Identification and Recruitment**

The Principal from your school has been asked to identify a sample group of Level 13 students at your school who, in the normal course of events, have been identified as successful. This success may have been achieved through being given a leadership role this year (e.g., sports captain, prefect, leadership in a cultural context; school committee membership etc), or through receiving an award at the end of year prize giving (e.g., academic award; best debater; top sportsperson, citizenship etc).

The Principal (or their delegate) has been asked to approach any ten of these successful students to invite them to participate in this study. You have been identified by the Principal of your school as a Level 13 student who is a 'successful young adult'. As such, your Principal (or their approved delegate) is informing you of this research, and inviting you to participate in the focus group discussion that will



happen at your school. The other participants will be Level 13 students from your school who have also been identified as successful young adults.

If you are interested in participating, please fill in the 'Prospective Participant' form, place this in the envelope provided marked 'Confidential – Research' and place this envelope in the box marked 'Confidential – Research' which you will find on the front desk at your school office. These envelopes will be passed on to me, and I will only contact you if you have given me your consent to contact you.

### **Project Procedures**

I realise that Level 13 is a busy year for students (particularly with exams), so the focus group discussions will occur after the last exam is completed at the end of the year. The discussion will occur on your school premises, and will take about one and a half hours in total. If anything comes up in the discussions that is of concern to you, your school Counsellor has indicated that he/she will be available if requested.

### **Data Management**

The focus group discussions will be tape recorded and transcribed. The tape recordings and transcriptions will be stored securely for five years, after which they will be destroyed.

All participants will be sent a copy of the summary of the findings of this research. A summary of the findings will also be sent to the participating schools, and a copy of the completed research will be held in the Library at Massey University.

Due to the small size of Napier and Hastings, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, in an attempt to maintain as much confidentiality as possible, no names will be mentioned, nor will connections be made between individual schools and the data collected. All participants in the discussion groups will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, and all identifying data (like names of people, places, and schools) will be given a code in the transcribed data, so will not appear in any document at any stage.

### **Participants Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation: If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question
- withdraw from the study at any time up to the point where you have given consent to the transcripts being used, or the deadline for this consent has passed.
- ask any questions about the study at any time during the participation
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded

## **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact us

RESEARCHER : Karen FAGAN. Email: [karen.fagan@xtra.co.nz](mailto:karen.fagan@xtra.co.nz) Ph:027 466 8507

SUPERVISOR : Mary NASH. Email:[M.Nash@massey.ac.nz](mailto:M.Nash@massey.ac.nz) Ph:063569099 x 2827

SUPERVISOR: Helen SIMMONS Email: [h.simmons@massey.ac.nz](mailto:h.simmons@massey.ac.nz) Ph: 063569099

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 09/48. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Karl Pajo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 04 801 5799 x 6929, email [humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz)*

## Appendix Three

### Letter Requesting Access to an Institution

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

My Address  
Email  
Phone

Schools Address

Date

Dear (Principal)

My name is Karen Fagan, and I am currently completing my Masters in Social Work through Massey University. I am writing to ask for your permission to access some of your students in order to complete my research project, titled:

**'Successful young adults are asked – 'In your experience, what builds confidence?'**

Much of Social Work research focuses on the problematic youth, be that in the area of addictions, mental health, youth crime, truancy etc. However, similar to the fields of education (that study high achievers), and physiotherapy (that studies elite athletes), my thesis has a strength based focus around the concepts of confidence and success. I believe that much can be learned from researching self confident young adults who are not only more likely to be successful, but also more likely to create opportunities, positively contribute to society, and generally have a full and rewarding adulthood. Hence, this research aims to explore what builds confidence, from the perspective of successful young adults.

The strategy for this piece of research is to collect data from a group of successful young adults (via a focus group discussion), asking them for their comments around the definition of confidence, and, from their perspective, what builds confidence. Level 13 students have been chosen as the sample group of young adults, and students who have succeeded in their High School setting have been chosen as 'successful'. Since the concept of 'success' can be quite subjective, this research project is focusing on those who have been identified as 'successful' in the normal course of events. Thus, at their High School they have been identified as successful

either through being elected into a role of leadership (e.g. sports captain; prefect; committee member; cultural leader; student representative etc), and/or they have been given an award at the end of year prize giving in 2009 (e.g., academic award, sports award; top debater; cultural award; citizenship award etc).

For this research I am approaching four High Schools in provincial New Zealand, with the request that some of their successful Level 13 students be part of a focus group. I am requiring only one focus group per school, with between six to ten participants per focus group. I am mindful of the work load (and other commitments) that staff and Level 13 students have, so am hoping to hold the focus group discussion after the exams are finished, in early December 2009.

My process for initially approaching potential participants is that you as Principal (or your nominated delegate) make the first contact to the Level 13 students that you deem to have fitted the criteria. As a part of this approach, it is anticipated that you will verbally outline the research, and provide the potential participant with a copy of an 'Information Sheet', a copy of a 'Prospective Participant' form, and an envelope with 'Confidential - Research' written on the front. The Principal (or their nominated delegate) will instruct the student to fill in the 'Prospective Participant' form according to their wishes, place the form in the envelope provided, and place the envelope in the box marked 'Confidential – Research' which will be placed on the front desk in the school office. Potential participants will be asked to complete this process within one week. The researcher will then contact only those proposed participants who indicated on the 'Prospective Participant' form that they consented to be contacted. I enclose both the 'Information Sheet', and the 'Prospective Participants' initial contact sheet for your interest. Only ten students need to be approached in the first instance.

In order to ensure that relevant cultural factors are considered before this research takes place, I will be asking you (as Principal) to guide me in the direction of the Cultural Advisors you deem appropriate within your school context. With your permission I will contact these Cultural Advisors with the aim of outlining this research, and seeking wisdoms, insights, and cautions with regards to both the content and process of this research journey.

Confidentiality of the schools and the students involved will be proactively protected. While the focus group discussions will be taped and transcribed, any identifying factor (name of person, school, or place) will be coded at the transcription stage. Only the transcriber, myself, and my two Massey appointed Supervisors will have access to these tapes (which will be stored under lock and key, then destroyed after five years).

All the participating students and schools will get a summary of the findings of the research. Along with this, I am more than happy to offer some Professional Development to your staff in the form of giving a presentation of the findings, if you

would like this. I predict that this will be near the end of 2010, or sometime in 2011 if you would prefer.

I have worked in the Social Service Sector for over thirty years, in many different capacities, with both State organisations and in the Not For Profit Sector. I have run focus group discussions before, and have worked alongside young people in many contexts. This research has passed the Massey University Ethics Approval process (09/48), and I have two Massey University appointed Supervisors' (Dr Mary Nash and Ms Helen Simmons) supporting and monitoring my research.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like any further information, or have any concerns you would like to discuss.

Yours faithfully

Karen FAGAN

Appendix Four

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

Prospective Participant

To be filled in by the prospective participant

This document includes:  
- Screening to Check that the Person Fits the Criteria  
- Contact Details  
- Consent to Contact

**Screening:**

*Please circle the appropriate answer :*

1. You are a Level 13 student. Yes      No

2. You have been identified as 'successful' by your school Principal. Yes      No

3. Which areas of your success do you think contributed to you being chosen for this research? *(please circle as many as you like)*

- |                                   |       |          |            |              |
|-----------------------------------|-------|----------|------------|--------------|
| Academic                          | Sport | Culture  | Leadership | Citizenship  |
| Music                             | Drama | Debating | Creativity | Peer support |
| Other <i>(please state)</i> ..... |       |          |            |              |

4. You are over the age of 16 years. Yes      No

5. You have received an Information Sheet about this research. Yes      No

6. You consent to the researcher (me) contacting you. Yes      No

**Contact Details:**

7. Please provide the researcher with details about how you would like to be contacted

Name.....

Email.....

Phone.....

**Consent to Contact:**

Please Sign .....

Date .....

P.T.O

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this form. Could you now please put the form in the envelope provided, and place the envelope in the box marked 'Confidential - Research' located on the front desk at your school office. This needs to occur sometime in the next week.

I will only contact you if you have consented to me doing so.

Thank you once again

Karen FAGAN

## Appendix Five

# Focus Group Participant Consent Form

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree not to disclose the names of other participants in the Focus Group.

I agree not to disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

I am over the age of 16 years.

I agree to this focus group discussion being taped.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name (printed):** \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix Six

# Authority for the Release of Transcripts

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

I agree that the transcript of the focus group discussion I attended (and extracts from this transcription) may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name (printed):** \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix Seven

Transcriber's Confidentiality Agreement

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

I ..... (Full Name – printed) agree  
to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than  
those required for the project.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name (printed):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Business:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix Eight

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

### Focus Group Discussions

#### INTRODUCTION

- First I would like to thank you for offering to participate in this focus group discussion. My name is Karen FAGAN. I am completing a Masters in Social Work through Massey University, and my aim is to find out from your experience, 'what is confidence' and 'what builds confidence?' Remember, if at any time you wish to withdraw from the discussion, that's fine by me.
- Remember, this is a small district, so be thoughtful about giving information that could identify a person or place. Having said that, if anything identifiable is mentioned, this will be given a code in the transcript in order to protect peoples privacy.
- *Check that everyone has signed a consent form, and ensure that everyone has the details of the School Counselor, and available times.*
- For the sake of ensuring that I accurately collect the information, I would like to tape record the session. This tape will be typed up by a transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. You will be given a code in the transcript, which means your names (and any other identifying name or place) will not appear. The person who transcribes the tape, myself, and my two supervisors from Massey University will be the only people who listen to this tape. Is that OK with you? *Check that all the participants agree, turn on the tape recorder.*
- Before we start, I would like to establish a set of ground rules for all of the participants in this discussion group. In order for you to be relaxed in sharing your thoughts, what agreement would you like amongst each other?

*Facilitate the establishment of ground rules. Ensure that the following are included:*

- *Respect for each other's right to their point of view, regardless of whether we agree with them or not*
  - *No interrupting*
  - *Everyone has the right to not speak*
  - *Everyone has the right to leave at any time*
  - *Confidentiality (the group will be asked firstly what they mean by this, and secondly what definition of confidentiality they would like to agree upon for this group discussion)*
  - *Be honest*
  - *Talk from your own experience rather than speaking on behalf of others*
  - *Cell phones turned off*
- 
- I have a question guideline to follow, but this is a guideline only, we don't need to stick to it, and you are welcome to go off on tangents, as long as it relates to building confidence.
  
  - Please help yourself to the food and drinks while we talk.

# Question Guideline

## **Introductions –**

1. To start with, can you please introduce yourself – your first name, your age, your ethnicity, and your gender.

## **Theme - The concept of ‘confidence’**

2. I am interested in hearing your definition of confidence ... what does ‘confidence’ mean to you?
3. Can you give me some examples of being confident?
4. How would you describe the feeling of being confident?
5. How do you know when you are confident?
6. How can you tell if other people are confident?

## **Theme - Building confidence in self:**

7. In your experience, what are some of the things that helped to build your confidence?  
*Prompts ... innate abilities; family / parents; heritage; peer group / friends; school; community; opportunities / challenges; successes ...*
8. What would you say were the most significant, or influential factors, that helped to build your confidence?  
*Prompts ... innate abilities; family / parents; heritage; peer group / friends; school; community; opportunities / challenges; successes ...*
9. Of all the possibilities you mentioned, can you identify the most significant thing that helped to build your confidence?
10. Have you any thoughts on how these things helped you to build confidence?
11. How does being confident assist you at school? ... as a family member? ... in your community? ... in the things you like to do?
12. Can you identify anything about confidence or confidence building that you think is unique to your ethnicity?

**Theme - Building confidence in others**

13. Any advice to adults working with young people about how to build their confidence?

**Theme – Making Connections**

14. Do you think any of your comments are particularly related to your natural abilities ... your gender ... your ethnicity ... your peer group ... your school ... your family ... your community? If so, which comments?

**Theme – Opening up the Discussion**

15. Any other thoughts or insights you would like to add at this stage?

**Before we end this session, does anyone have any last thoughts they would like to share?**

**Remember the ground rule of confidentiality and respect**

*– re-iterate the shared meanings that were agreed to at the start of the session*

**Are there any other comments or thoughts about the ground rules?**

**Can I now ask you to please fill in the ‘Authority to Release the Transcript’ form before you leave today. Are there any questions about this?**

**I would like to send everyone a copy of the summary of the findings. You may have left this district by the time the summary is complete, so please write down on the form being circulated your name and email address if you would like this summary sent to you.**

**Remember the school counselor who is available at ... on ... if anyone wishes to touch base with him/her.**

**Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion.**

## Appendix Nine

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

# Cultural Advisors share their thoughts

## Introduction

As a part of the process this study included a cultural scan of the research design and the research methodology. The cultural scan included meeting with three cultural advisors who had been nominated by the two participating schools from within their own school community. The meetings occurred on the school premises and before the focus group discussions took place. The cultural advisor from one school had particular insight when it came to building an inclusive school culture, while the two cultural advisors (both Māori staff members) from the other school had particular insight when it came to supporting Māori students within mainstream education. Some of the information shared by the cultural advisors went beyond the cultural scan required for this study, and towards their own perceptions and interpretations with regards to building confidence in young adults, particularly in a school setting. This information was informative and insightful in its own right, and as such has been collated and summarised in this appendix. In line with the ethnographic approach I have included many quotes in order to enhance the visibility of the cultural advisors voices.

## School as a cultural context

According to the cultural advisors the culture at their school was an influential factor that supported (or otherwise) students in their learning. Aspects like a sense of belonging, a sense of being safe, a sense of being included, and a sense of being

encouraged were all impacted on by the culture of the school. Suggestions from the cultural advisors on how their school enhanced this positive school culture are shared below.

**A sense of school pride and belonging which has been enhanced using the following strategies :**

- At one school a uniform was made compulsory for all students, including level 13 students. A supply of spare uniforms was purchased by the school and given to those students whose families were financially stretched. This way all students who walked through the school gate began the day looking much the same (i.e., were not differentiated or stigmatised on the basis of their clothing).

*“Some of the families were socioeconomically, just couldn’t cut the mustard with the uniform. We gave the kids a uniform, we gave them a clean shirt ...we gave them shoes that had laces ... we stocked up ... so when someone comes through the gate they look the same ... and that placed everyone in the same playing field.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- At the same school a special school tie (and other parts of the uniform) was introduced for special occasions, like representing the school in public. Wearing these special uniform pieces encouraged a sense of pride and acknowledgement, and became privileges to strive for.
- Having a zero tolerance for bad manners (like spitting or clipping someone on the head).
- Creating opportunities for leadership and mentoring for the older students.

*“I think a positivity with a lot of these kids has come from that feeling of school pride and school spirit, and wanting to represent ... plus, I think we have offered a lot more leadership roles at that senior level.”*

(Cultural Advisor)



- Encouraging good role models by rewarding good citizens.
- One school had a period one day a week during school time when all the sports teams had their practice. Doing this during school time enabled most of the students to participate. This meant that the coaches were happier cause their whole team was usually present (compared to after school or before school practices when lots of the students had other commitments like jobs or looking after their siblings). Having the whole team present at practices meant the team was more likely to improve their skills, perform better, win more games, and thus experience more success. This flowed on to more awards, more sense of team pride, and the development of more positive relationships amongst team members.
- Staff went and watched the sports teams when they played their games in the weekend. This showed support, gave them something to talk about with the student during the school week (thus building staff/student relationships) and also provided some monitoring in order to ensure that everyone was dressed in the team uniform.

**A school community in which no form of bullying was tolerated. One school cultural advisor highlighted the following strategies their school used to minimise bullying :**

- Keeping a close eye on the year nines to make sure they were OK and that they felt safe.
- Having a zero tolerance for bullying.

*“We started really looking after our year 9 coming in so they felt safe. We put ... strategies out in the playground, everyone could walk around, we started to reduce the bullying, the bullying surveys, hammered the bullies, got the parents in and told them ‘it’s not good enough. You start straightening them up at home or we’ll do something about it’ ... start changing the whole culture so the kids could walk around and feel safe.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Acting immediately and firmly whenever bullying was identified. That way the students knew there was a harsh and immediate consequence.
- Having staff proactively in the school grounds, checking out areas where the students hung out, and intervening as soon as they got wind of any potential difficulties.

*“My number one role is ... ‘is it safe?’ There’s no fights because I’m walking ... I’m out and about, I’m hearing stuff so you can intercept at the start ... and doing duty in strategic areas.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

*“I think the fact that no one’s pushing them in line for their lunch or bullying them around might help their confidence around the place, they feel confident to walk around the back of the gym.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

**A sense of inclusiveness and belonging which was enhanced using the following strategies:**

- Proactively finding meaningful and authentic ways for all students to receive at least one award at a full assembly. This encouraged more parents to attend assemblies in which awards were presented, thus they become more connected to the school as a whole, and had an increased sense of pride about their child being a part of the school.
- Staff stood at the school gate and welcomed students by name each morning, and farewelled them by name at the end of each school day as they left.

*“Getting to know the kids ... I know all the kids here by name so when they come in the gate I can say ‘good morning John, good morning Andrew, how did your game go on Saturday?’ ... I greet the kids every morning coming in ... and then every night when they leave the gate I see them out right at the very front of the school here.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- At one school a haka was specially written for them, and learning it was a compulsory part of the year nine curriculum.
- Having the haka performed competently by the whole school (students and staff), both as a demonstration of a unique school identity, but also as a way of collectively expressing identity at special events.

*“We’ve had a couple of teachers leave that have been quite popular, and the whole school have done it to them, and man it’s powerful ... yeah ... impromptu ... the old hairs on the back of the neck stand up ... It’s good when you see that school pride you know, and we all do it. The staff, we can all do it ... and the kids like it when they see you do it.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Having positive staff / student relationships.

*“I think one of the biggest contributing factors to the great culture we’ve got here at the moment is the staff student relationships ... its strong ... we’re out mixing and talking ... and taking some interest in them.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

**Encourage, challenge and extend all the students using the following strategies:**

- One school introduced speech at year 9 level so all students were encouraged to develop skills and confidence around speaking in front of a group.
- Made sure that there were lots of opportunities in a wide range of things, and encouraged all students to just give things a go.
- Created lots of opportunities for students at all levels to achieve, and this achievement was recognised and acknowledged at school assemblies.
- One school streamed classes in year 10 so that students competed at their own level. That way getting placed at or near the top of their class in a

subject was a more achievable goal for all the students (not just the top students).

*“The student with your stanine two level, which is getting down low, can experience success. He’s not always at the bottom of the maths class and at the bottom of the English class, you know, cause that’s just the way it is and he’s always been there. So he’s in with 16 other kids that are all the same ability, and he gets every chance of getting top in a subject. So...you know ... they experience that, so they’re not competing against Joe Bloggs from general mainstream, they’re competing in their class and that’s where the awards come, to their grouping, not top in year 9 ... and cause then the parents can’t wait to come to prize giving, so you know we’re inundated with parents because ...they’ve never got an award before.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Introduced accelerate classes for the very capable students.
- Stamping down on bullying, providing a wide range of extra-curricula, having accelerate classes, and offering a wide range of opportunities (including scholarships) resulted in attracting some more of the talented local kids. At one school some local parents (many of high achieving children) had previously been busing and driving their children to other schools because they had considered the other schools to be better, safer, and believed that they provided more opportunity. Once this pattern reversed (i.e., the high achieving sports/ arts/ music/ academic students started to stay at their local school), the school’s achievements improved. This increased the school and community pride, and then gradually out of town families (with high achieving children) wanted to come to their school. A general cycle of success in all areas then became evident. Eventually the school became zoned and a balloted system was required for entry.

## **Building confidence amongst young Māori within a school context**

According to the cultural advisors the building of confidence amongst young Māori within a mainstream school context increased their likelihood of success. Aspects like a sense of belonging, a sense of inclusiveness, a sense of being encouraged, a sense of being culturally safe, and a sense of being self-determined were all identified as being core components that enabled Māori students to be able to make the most of their schooling opportunities. Some suggestions from the cultural advisors on how to achieve this are shared below.

**In order to get a sense of acceptance and inclusiveness the following strategies were recommended:**

- Be less intensely concerned about being politically correct but rather focus on acceptance and inclusiveness.

*“Growing up in the era where everything’s become so PC, we’re not allowed to say anything ... they’re walking on eggshells.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

*“It’s feeling safe about what you say, and teenagers are so conscientious of saying the wrong thing and looking dumb ... in front of their peers.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Accept all Māori students, and don’t judge or pigeonhole ‘Māoriness’ on the basis of physical appearance or knowledge of te reo.
- Include and celebrate Māori as part of the wider collective community by including expressions of kaupapa Māori (like haka, waiata, karakia, taiaha) as integral parts of the wider collective activities and celebrations.
- Mentor a wide variety of things (not just academic).

- Promote positive collective belonging, collective challenges, and acknowledge collective achievements.
- Recognise that success is not just about academic results, it can also be measured by a student regularly coming to school, trying his hardest, and being happy and settled within the school environment.

*“Some parents that I’ve spoken to, you know, success to them is that their 15,16 year old boy is not in a gang ... and their daughter’s not pregnant.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Ensure that the school is a safe environment (physically and emotionally) for all.
- Positively acknowledge the individual student’s by name. Welcoming them into the classroom, asking after and caring about their well being. Those positive personal relationships and social interactions enhance a sense of belonging and acceptance.

*“What we’re working on now is being culturally safe, but we haven’t worked out how to make them emotionally safe ... and I think that has to be in there, and even though the new curriculum talks values and beliefs, you’ll find that ... the teaching staff ... have no formal training to recognise that, or strategies to help students do that ... I reckon there’s staff here that do it automatically, you look at the kids that’ll step up for them...you see kids that’ll work really well for those staff and you think they’re doing something to bring the best out in that kid, therefore they’re obviously working on that emotional level with that student.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Recognise that all students want to feel special...for something.

*“Just recognising that each student has potential whether it be in the*

*classroom, whether it be academic, sports....this kid can make the most perfect flax flower...that's potential, and just enhancing that and recognising that, and you know, every child wants to feel special."*

(Cultural Advisor)

**In order to encourage, challenge and extend the students the following strategies were recommended:**

- Get in behind the individual achievers, do the cheerleading and promoting (i.e., building mana) for that person, and support whanau expectations.

*"There's that pressure that the whole family relied on me, and read my marks and tell everyone what I got, but if I didn't have that ... family promotion I probably would have just sat there and done nothing, so that worked good for me, cause for one who had no confidence it made me get out there and do it."*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Continue with the positive role models and mentoring throughout high school years. Often people like the All Blacks will visit primary schools and intermediates, but not high schools. Yet this is particularly when positive role models and mentors (especially for young Māori males) are most needed.

*"When did the All Blacks last go to a high school unless it was their old boys school...where they once were? ... [students are] nurtured through primary school and they get all this positive stuff and they get role models coming in or the All Blacks come in, and they get to intermediate and they get a few more of that, and they get to high school and everyone backs off and says 'you're adults now, away you go'."*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Be encouraging, honest, consistent, realistic, and fair.

*“The holistic way of doing it, and that to me brings out more in the student, and without realising it you start building up that relationship and trust, and then you get that self confidence going. But then it takes just one comment ... you might think its trivial but some of them hold onto it, and it could be the one phrase that stopped them ... following their path ... we gotta make them realise that there are ups and downs and you do make mistakes and you gotta pick yourself back up ... we can't be all nice and say 'oh you're doing wonderful and great' when all the time they're acting like crap ... we've got to keep it real, say 'look, the real thing is you gotta be competitive, you gotta be focused, you gotta try your hardest, and we're not giving you all excellences just because you smile nice'.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

**In order to get a sense of being culturally safe the following strategies were recommended:**

- Don't facilitate situations where individuals are expected to self-promote. As a wider school community, identify, support and promote mana.

*“When you look at someone who's got mana in a community, everyone ... say's 'why's he got mana?', but it's because everyone around respects them and promotes them to other people ... they put him up on that pedestal ... and he goes forward because he knows he has to because his whole whanau's behind him.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Don't disrespect the student's mana in front of others.

*“When you reprimand a Māori student, how you reprimand them can*



*just knock them for a six ... if you stand them up in front of a class and barrel them, that's it, you've totally just ripped their mana to bits ... and the teacher can't understand why they shut down ... they'll shut down and stop working for them."*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Have a place within the school context which comes from a kaupapa Māori philosophy. Have a genuine school wide respect for this place, and include (as an integral reflection of the wider school community) a contribution from this perspective in all school events.
- Have a school culture that encourages a sense of pride in all ethnic identity.
- Remember that anything that reflects on the student is also seen as a reflection on the whanau (both positively and negatively).

**In order to enhance a sense of being self-determined the following strategies were recommended:**

- Teach and develop students social skills (particularly their interpersonal communication skills) along with building of resiliency.

*"We've got to try and build up something here so they will leave this school with the ability to walk up and shake someone's hand, look them straight in the eye, or say something confident, they won't sit back ... all these years we've been saying it's got to be the family or the school or the kids, well that ain't working and it ain't gonna, it works if it's there but if it's not there, we need to find a way around and make it work, and that's where I believe that fixing the inside of the kid will help them and if you can, that inner strength ... the strength to step forward and say yes I am worthy of being here, and I know what to do if I get shot down, I know how to cope with that ... until you can get the whole person going the academic won't come greatly."*

(Cultural Advisor)

*“Getting them stronger so when they do leave here ... and they do face those situations by themselves, we’ve armed them with enough skills to keep picking themselves up.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

*“She walks with purpose ... she can interact with her peers, she can interact with adults ... she will interact confidently, she won’t drop her eyes or stand back ... she’ll look at you and talk to you adult to adult ... if you’ve told [students name] to do something, she’ll do it ... just confident, but ... not arrogant ... she ... didn’t put her hand up to be a school leader ... she became a peer support leader in charge of form class ... her whole demeanour was ‘I can do it, and I’m doing it’ ... she just got on with the job ... she was always happy ... as a Māori leader I can see her being easily anything.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

- Relax on the politically correct approach which can celebrate failure, like saying ‘well done’ when a student comes last.

*“Don’t give them a medal for getting last, he’s never going to learn from that ... he finished the race, pat on the back, well done, but give a medal to the one who came first ... put him on a pedestal and say yeah, that’s what your goal is, aim to be like him.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

Then support the young adult to identify ways to improve, and identify achievable goals, and work alongside them however you can as they challenge and improve their skills/fitness/whatever.

*“You say to them ‘well, how can you do that better? Come on, I think you did well out there but you can do better, so tell me’ ... they have to believe it themselves.”*

(Cultural Advisor)

## Appendix Ten

Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

### Sample Exit Interview for Level 13 students

#### Introduction

This research study involved exploring the concept of 'confidence'. The data gathering component involved using focus group discussions with Year 13 students at the end of their last high school year. These seventeen and eighteen year olds were asked to explore the 'concept of confidence', the building of 'self-confidence', and ways that they believed adults could enhance the confidence in others. As the researcher involved I found the information they shared not only useful in terms of exploring the concept of 'confidence', but also most informative when it came to events and mechanisms within a high school setting that both enhanced and inhibited their confidence. These insights could be most informative to schools as they pursue goals of making school relevant, inclusive, and empowering for all.

Many organisations hold exit interviews with departing staff in the belief that they have little to gain (or loose) by sharing their experiences and insights. The value in this for the employer is that they gain honest feedback from their departing staff's perspective. This feedback is likely to include criticisms, highlights and suggestions for improvement all of which, if 'heard', have the potential to provide constructive guidance for the future. This situation is arguably much the same for Year 13 students as they exit high school for the last time.

Having introduced the potential value to schools of exit interviews with Year 13 students, this appendix continues with some suggestions for facilitating group based exit interviews, along with some sample questions for consideration. The research design outlined in Chapter Five of this report provides some further guidance with regards to this.

## Suggestions for facilitating exit interviews with small groups

### of Level 13 students:

- The interactive nature of focus group discussions can be a useful strategy.
- Around six to ten students is small enough to include everyone, while large enough to contain a variety of perspectives.
- Run these groups after the last senior prize giving, but before the students sign out at the end of year. This will minimize power differentials between the school and the students, and between the students.
- Consult more than one group in order to include a wide cross section of the Level 13 community. For example, groups according to interests (like sports; art; music; community etc), groups according to ethnicity, leadership groups, and groups of students who have struggled at school.
- The facilitator could be a school staff member or an outsider.
- Facilitate the establishment of ground rules, ensuring the following are included :
  - Respect for each other's right to their point of view, regardless if we agree with them or not.
  - No interrupting.
  - Everyone has the right to not speak.
  - Everyone has the right to leave at any time.
  - Confidentiality (clarify with the group what they mean by this).
  - Be honest.
  - Talk from your own experience rather than speaking on behalf of others.
  - Cell phones turned off.
- Tape the discussion, and have the tapes transcribed, as this will minimize the dependence on the facilitators interpretation of what the students have said.
- Keep the discussions to about one and a half hours long.

- Reflect on the feedback you wish to collect. While in general it may be much the same across all groups, there may be some specific areas of interest that vary between groups.

### Some sample questions (in no particular order)

#### School inclusiveness

- Over the years what helped you the most with regards to you getting involved in school activities?
- What inhibited you from getting involved in school activities?
- Is the school inclusive of all students? Who gets included the most, and who gets included the least?
- Is there enough opportunity for leadership at your school? What other leadership roles do you think they could have?
- Is being a ‘good citizen’ valued by students, and by the school?
- Which type of student gets the most kudos at your school?
- Was kaupapa Māori integrated into your school culture? How did this occur? What else could be done? Was it supported by the wider school community? Was it sufficient from your perspective?
- Is your school culturally safe? Give examples.

#### Challenging and encouraging students

- Do you think the school acknowledges achievement enough? If not, what would be some examples? What would you like to see the school do about this?
- Were you sufficiently challenged during your school years? What were some of the best challenges? What challenges or activities would you like to have had, but didn’t get the opportunity?
- What did staff do that most encouraged and inspired you?
- What did staff do that most hindered you?

- What is the most important thing that you have gained out of your school years?

### School safety :

- Looking back, was the playground safe from bullying? If not ... were there any parts of the playground that were more exposed to bullying? What type of bullying? How often? Who were usually the targets? What happened when other students stepped in?
- What was the best thing the school did to stop bullying? What else do you think the school could do?
- Why do you think bullies bully?
- How do the victims cope with bullying? What do they do? How could the school support them?
- Did you feel safe at all times at the school? What were some examples of when you didn't feel safe? What do you think the school could have done about that?

### Caring for the whole student

- Does your school care for the whole student? If so, how? If not, which part are they missing?
- Were you and your friends mostly happy to be at school? What helped with this? What could have helped with this?
- What happened at school to help students learn to cope when things became difficult? Is there anything else you think the school could do to encourage a student to bounce back after a difficult situation?
- Is the support for students wellbeing at your school adequate? Do you have any suggestions about what else the school could do?

### Leaving school

- Do you have a plan for your future? Some hopes and dreams?
- Did the school support you in identifying these hopes and dreams? Could they have? If so, how?



1 October 2009

Ms Karen Fagan  
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**HASTINGS**

Dear Karen

**Re: HEC: Southern B Application – 09/48**  
**Successful young adults are asked – “In your experience, what builds confidence?”**

Thank you for your letter received 21 September 2009.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sharon Stevens, Acting Chair  
**Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B**

cc Dr Mary Nash  
School of Health & Social Services  
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