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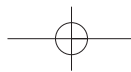
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## ***As long as you're resilient you'll succeed:* School disaffected adolescents' perspectives on their willingness to engage in high injury-risk graffiti-writing activities**

**Myra F. Taylor\***

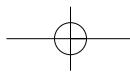
*Edith Cowan University*

A lack of sense of school belonging can be a destabilising aspect in disaffected students' lives, so much so that they will often seek an alternative sense of belonging outside of the school arena. Gaining out-of-school acceptance within the non-conforming, graffiti subculture is dependent upon proving one's worth through willing engagement in visual acts of high-risk daring. This exemplar study examines the health-risk injuries sustained by eight adolescent crew leaders within the graffiti subculture. The study's findings reveal four reoccurring sources of graffiti-related injury (ie. *tagging hard-to-reach places*, *fighting rival crews*, *graffiti under the influence*, and *eluding Police capture*). A second finding emanating out of the study is the perception among teenage crew leaders that they needed to be seen to be resilient, in terms of overcoming their graffiti sustained injuries, if they are to succeed in their desire of maintaining their status both within their crew and broader graffiti youth subculture. Finally, the societal need to establish a non-conforming/delinquent bridging pathway to social inclusion is discussed.

**Keywords:** Sense of school belonging, adolescent identity, peer recognition, graffiti, youth subculture, resilience, injury-risk activities

Adolescence is an inherently tumultuous developmental period during which young people experiment with risk and acts of delinquency (Griffin, 2001; York, 2007). This experimentation typically occurs along a continuum that ranges in behaviours that are unacceptable to schools (eg. bullying, disrupting lessons, challenging authority); to behaviours that are problematic for families (eg. truanting from school, staying out at night, stealing from family members, involvement in out-of-control parties); to behaviours that contravene society's laws (eg. property damage,

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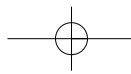


*Myra F. Taylor*

underage drinking, drug abuse, burglaries and assaults) (Carroll, Green and Houghton, 2003). Individuals at a low risk for delinquency are those who have been apprehended by Police and have received a caution for their illegal/antisocial actions, but have not had their case referred on to the judiciary. In such instances, a sense of school belonging is known to be a protective factor against further engagement in illegal/ health-risk activities (eg. cigarette smoking, binge-drinking, marijuana use, sexual experimentation, weapon carrying, association with delinquent peers, living on the streets, and involvement in crime), which when pursued in combination, often elicit poor mental health outcomes (eg. loneliness, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm) (Anderman, 2002; Anderman and Freeman, 2004; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Flemming and Hawkins 2004; Mounts 2004; Choenarom, Williams and Hagerty, 2005; Hamm and Faircloth, 2005; Ueno, 2005; Shochet, Dadds, Ham and Montague, 2006; Evans, 2007; Newman, Lohman and Newman, 2007; Sun and Hui, 2007; Vandemark, 2007; York, 2007). In contrast, adolescents at the delinquent end of the at-risk continuum tend to have such weak sense of school belonging (ie. feel uncomfortable within the school setting) that they use their antisocial/illegal acts as a way of connecting, communicating, and seeking approval from their target 'street' delinquent youth audience. Indeed, their goal of association with delinquent peers frequently orientates them towards a trajectory not only for school failure and crime involvement, but also for poor adult health outcomes (Blum and Libbey, 2004; Bond *et al*, 2007).

Maslow (1954) ranked the sense of belonging as the third highest fundamental human need, placing it above only the most basic physiological and safety human needs. Hence, the adolescent need to belong has long been associated with the socialisation process of gaining peer recognition, acceptance and inclusion (Anant, 1969; Hagerty and Patusky, 1995). Indeed, the act of becoming connected to, affiliated with, and accepted by others is considered to be critical to the maintenance of healthy emotions and cognitive processing (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi and Cummins, 2008; Cicchini, 2009; Steger and Kashdan, 2009). Moreover, a sizeable body of literature exists that clearly demonstrates that in Western societies a sense of school belonging is essential to normative adolescent development, academic engagement, motivation, and general experience of life (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum, 2002; Pittman and Richmond, 2007).

McNeely and Falci (2004) have extended current thinking even further by hypothesising that the ability of schools to protect their adolescent students from engagement in health-risk activities is not solely linked to a strong sense of school belonging, but is also highly dependent on which cohort of individuals within the school community the connection is formed with. A strong school connection (ie. feeling valued, respected, and included) typically is the result of students receiving attention, empathy, praise, and acceptance from their teachers and classmates (Shochet *et al*, 2006). Interestingly, McNeely and Falci (2004) posit that while many students have

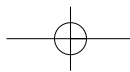


*As long as your're resilient you'll succeed*

an ambivalent or strong conventional connection to their school community some other disaffected students can develop a strong unconventional connection to school. Conventional connectedness is achieved by students gaining the acceptance of their classmates through visibly engaging in pro-social behaviours and, in addition, the acceptance of their teachers who project prevailing societal norms. Conversely, unconventional connectedness occurs when disengaged or academically failing students establish connections with other non-conforming age-mates who do not abide by the school's pro-social norms. According to Dishion and colleagues (2004) such non-conforming students typically engage in the types of health-risk activities that negatively impact on their physical and mental wellbeing and the emotional wellbeing of other community members.

For instance, when young people who are perceived to be deviant hang-out in public spaces their presence tends to generate within certain elements of the general populace a sense of moral panic (see Lumby and Funnell, 2011; Taylor and Khan, 2011; Waiton, 2001; Young, 2011). This panic stems from a fear of threat to their personal safety and characteristically results in such blame lamentations as: Where are the parents? Why have the parents abdicated their responsibility of ensuring their child is in school? Why are teachers not schooling adolescents into socially acceptable ways of behaving? According to Kerr and Stattin (2000), the difficulty in monitoring school disaffected adolescent students is that their guidance and management necessitates a dynamic communicative and disclosing relationship with parents and teachers. The problem many parents and teachers face in this regard is that this need for a disclosing relationship occurs at the very time when adolescents are characteristically reluctant to share information about who they are socialising with either in or out of school (Dishion, Nelson and Bullock, 2004). Moreover, in instances where adolescents are at the delinquent end of the at-risk continuum experience family/school communications break downs, then there is a tendency for them to prematurely assume autonomous (ie. self-governance) control over their lives (Kerr and Stattin, 2000). However, this premature assumption of control often sets them apart from their conforming peers and influences their adolescent choice of social identity.

According to Reputation Enhancement Theory (Emler and Reicher, 1995) the type of social identity that adolescents select depends largely on the image they seek to project. For example, if an adolescent associates with the ethos of their school and the social mores of their community then they typically tend to assume a conforming social identity. On the other hand, if an adolescent fails to develop a sense of school belonging they are more likely to seek an alternative non-conforming social identity with like-minded peers (Carroll, Houghton, Durkin and Hattie, 2009; Taylor, Houghton and Bednall, 2010). Such adolescents sitting at the delinquency end of the at-risk continuum will go to extraordinary lengths to establish a personal image that accurately reflects the image of the group with whom they wish to associate and to



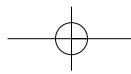
*Myra F. Taylor*

maintain a non-conforming social identity in front of their conforming peers (Emler, 1984; Emler and Reicher, 1995; Houghton, Carroll, Tan and Hopkins, 2008).

A later refinement of Reputation Enhancement Theory, namely Reputation Enhancing Goals Theory (Carroll, Houghton, Hattie and Durkin, 2001) suggests that the purposive selection of a non-conforming social identity by adolescents on the delinquency end of the at-risk continuum is often done to maximise their social status. Moreover, their engagement in illegal activities provides them with the added social recognition reward of increased street 'cred' among their sub-cultural group. To maintain this added status, or to achieve leadership status within the group, then non-conforming adolescents have to visibly demonstrate their prowess in the group's specialist activity, particularly, if they want to gain the group's protective backing (Taylor, Houghton and Bednall, 2010; Taylor, 2011). However, protection derived from a bonded allegiance to a non-conforming sub-cultural group is not an automatic given as finding a group of deviant youths that can be trusted to reciprocate such empowering protective resources is often difficult to achieve (Deuchar, 2009). In addition, sub-cultural group membership is not stable as leadership positions within the group are constantly under challenge (Carroll, Green and Houghton, 2003). Consequently, non-conforming adolescents will attempt to generate the social capital support resources (eg. belonging, allegiance, solidarity, trust, security, and reciprocity) they need by forming small groups (ie. crews/gangs) within their sub-culture (Taylor, 2011). While small group formations are common little is known about the health-risk that their adolescent members endure in order to obtain the social capital support resources they desire. Thus, it is this knowledge gap that this present exemplar study aims to fill by detailing the injury-risk activities that teen-aged graffiti taggers and writers willingly engage in so as to gain acceptance (belonging) and status within the graffiti crew subculture.

## **Method**

Unlike most qualitative studies that aim to generate theory or findings that are transferable to a larger population, the sole objective of exemplar studies such as this one is to develop an understanding of a hitherto poorly understood phenomenon within a defined social context. The key attribute of exemplar studies is that they allow data from within, and across, one or more datasets to be intensely interrogated and rigorously contrasted (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1994; Cresswell, 2003). Through this process a study becomes an exemplar for other studies. Flyvbjerg (2006) maintains that exemplar studies are critically important as a 'discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without a systematic production of exemplars, and a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one' (p.219). Indeed, the combined strength of multiple exemplar studies is that they generate findings, which by weight of their combined numbers, produce insights into an under-investigated social phenomenon (Denzin, 1983; Stake, 1994;



*As long as your're resilient you'll succeed*

Punch, 2005). Unlike larger theory generating and quantitative studies where tests of objectivity and credibility are judged by the strength of their numerical evaluation or thematic construction, the value of exemplar studies is judged by whether they bring something new or different to the understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). This exemplar study sought to explore the graffiti-related injury experiences of school-aged leaders of graffiti crews located in metropolitan Perth, the state capital city of Western Australia.

Due to the study's exploratory nature an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). The epistemology of interpretive phenomenology is that it is concerned with examining revelations that are embedded deeply in the investigated participants' lived experiences and, subsequently, identify common threads within their narratives (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Groenewald, 2004; Flood, 2010).

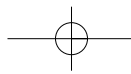
Semi-structured interviews have long been determined to be an appropriate and respectful way of gathering narrative information from vulnerable youth populations, mainly, because this form of interviewing a) characteristically facilitates the development of a non-threatening rapport between interviewer and interviewee and b) provides sufficient flexibility that rich data can be gathered (Patton, 2002; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Hence, this form of interviewing was utilised by the author to elicit from the study's participants the nature and extent of the injuries they had experienced during the course of their graffiti-writing exploits.

## **Participants**

All eight of the study's participants were male teenagers who ranged in age from 15-19 years. Seven were Caucasian and one other was of mixed Caucasian/Aboriginal decent. The teenagers had all dropped out of mainstream education and were currently attending one of two alternative schools. Both of these schools provided the students with a second 'fast-tracked' opportunity to gain the basic literacy and numeracy skill competencies required for entry into post-school training programs. All but one of the teenagers resided in one parent-headed households. Three had ongoing contact with their non-resident parent. One teenager was being raised by his grandparents. Finally, six of the teenagers were leaders of one or more small graffiti crews (ie. crews with 2-5 members) and the remaining two were in leadership positions with one or more large graffiti crews.

## **Procedure**

Ethics approval was sought and granted from the administering institution to conduct the interviews with the teenagers. Contact was made with the head teachers of two alternative high schools. At this time the aims of the research were explained to the head teachers, who in turn, became instrumental in distributing information letters and consent forms. Once the participants had been recruited through this



*Myra F. Taylor*

process both head teachers provided a quiet room for the interviews to take place. While it might seem somewhat paradoxical that a study of the behaviours of school disaffected students be conducted in a school, all 14-17 year olds in Western Australian schools are mandated to attend high school (albeit in this case an alternative school) unless they have a formalised trade apprenticeship. Increasingly, students seeking an apprenticeship have to obtain a minimum level of literacy and numeracy competency. Hence, while disaffected from the mainstream education system, the participants were still required to attend school. Prior to the start of each individual interview the participant was informed of their participatory rights and were given an opportunity to ask questions and to withdraw from the study. None chose to do so. Each of the audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes.

## **Analysis**

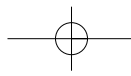
All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions formed the study's dataset, which was subsequently analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analytic approach. Although not essential to this process, the dual concepts of 'bracketing' (inspecting) and 'epoche' (synthesising) were employed (Crist and Tanner, 2003; Bednall, 2006). During the inspecting stage of the analysis handwritten unfocussed memo-notes were made in the margins of the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These notes included reflections, associations, comments and questions. Once completed the memos were subsequently ordered and coded until an accurate representation of the teenagers recounted experiences emerged. In the second synthesising stage these ordered codes were clustered on the basis of their shared meaning (Groenwald, 2004). The theme categories that emerged through this process are expanded upon below.

## **Findings**

When asked to recall the types of injuries they had sustained during the course of their graffiti-writing exploits the teenagers recounted four main forms of injury, namely, fall injuries incurred when tagging hard-to-reach places; fight-related injuries resulting from inter-crew rivalries; injuries sustained as a result of graffing under the influence; and injuries acquired while eluding Police capture. Each of these four injury experiences are detailed as follows.

### **■ Fall injuries incurred when tagging hard-to-reach places**

The motivation for teenaged graffers to place their tags (ie. their 3-4 letter street moniker) on-hard-to-reach places is that the higher the level of daring involved (eg. tagging a moving object, hanging upside down to tag a bridge span, or tagging a stationary/moving police car) the greater the street kudos afforded to them by both their conforming and non-conforming peers. The problem for teenaged graffers



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seeking recognition and notoriety within the graffiti sub-culture is that they have to be seen to be continually upping the risk associated with their tag's placement. Hence, their tagging activities often verge on the extreme. For instance, all of the study's teenage graffers recounted tales of having fallen inside abandoned buildings, off roofs or freeway bridges in their pursuit of a highly daring tagging spot. For example:

*I've fallen when I climbed over the freeway bridge to put my tag up there. I've broken most of the bones in my right foot. I've dislocated this knee, dislocated this elbow and broken my collar bone all from falls. Mainly through not thinking when I'm painting and just trying to reach a spot higher than the rest. (Graffer #4)*

*They'll never open up the X (name of abandoned building) again it's just too dangerous. I've fallen through the floor twice and that is when I only weighed about 50 kilos. It's just too dangerous in there. I was like crawling in and out of the windows to get to a ledge about 120 feet up in the air. It was only half a metre wide, if that, and I knew if I made one slip I'd die from the fall or if I didn't die I'd be in one hell of a painful way. I've so many scars. I've a big gash on my leg. I've a scar going from the inside of my thigh going down almost to my knee. (Graffer #2)*

*I once got hit by a car when I fell off a roof and onto an overpass. Luckily the guy had slowed down, but he still hit me with enough force to break a couple of my ribs. (Graffer #1)*

Other common fall injury locations were railway bridges and tunnels:

*Jumping on and off trains is bad... (having fallen) I can't sleep on my left side even now coz there's still a lot of pain there. (Graffer #7)*

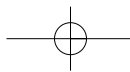
*When you are painting on the train line you always have the danger in the back of your mind. You can't always hear these electrical trains, because they're like, so quiet! I've nearly been hit by trains. My friend got hit... plenty of people have died or have been injured. (Graffer #6)*

The study's teenage graffers all accepted that physical risk and danger came with the 'territory' and considered the risk acceptable because the act of tagging a hitherto untagged high-risk spot carried great sub-cultural kudos and, in addition, the successful placement of a tag provided them with an 'incredible adrenaline rush'.

### ■ **Fight-related injuries resulting from inter-crew rivalries**

While tag placement falls were an occasional source of injury for the teenagers a much more common source of injury were the fights that emanated out of inter-crew rivalries over style and territorial tagging issues. In relation to style, while there is a high level of tolerance among experienced graffitiists for 'bad tags' written by 'toys' (new graffers) undergoing their tagging apprenticeship, there is far less tolerance of experienced graffers who exhibit bad style. Typically, tags with poor style, or graffiti that does not conform to the established graffiti styles will be slashed (have a line





Myra F. Taylor

drawn through them). Unsurprisingly, slashing raises the ire of the tagger/writer whose work has been slashed. In addition, slashing is also construed to be a fight declaration. One graffer explained:

*If you do a really nice piece somewhere and you've spent an hour and a half over it and someone goes over or slashes it with a marker then of course you're going to get angry and you'll want to get back at them. (Graffer #5)*

Given that most crew members will not slash each others' work, then slashers tend to be members of other neighbourhood crews competing for space or other out-of-neighbourhood crews whose members provocatively enter another crew's painting territory unannounced. Two teenagers provided the following insights into territorial origins of graffiti crew fights:

*Generally people have their own areas that they paint all of the time and if you're caught by one of those people painting in their spot... well it's a pack mentality, word gets around and people will kick your head in. (Graffer #8)*

*If you want to fight a crew you can either go into their territory and talk or you can go in unannounced. If you go in their territory like unannounced they can like kill you. So what you do is you like send in your saint (second-in-command) they're like the messenger from God and see whether their leader is like ready to talk or fight. (Graffer #6)*

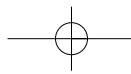
*Because we're an illegal sub-culture you do get crews that fight each other. There are crews that end up fighting each other all the time. Having big fights all night and people getting bashed. Some people from rival crews they can like stab you. I've been stabbed probably on three or four occasions and I've been hurt pretty bad. I've been like punched, punched like to the head. So from that point of view, it (fights) just keeps going on and on... With me anything goes, I love the adrenaline rush from fighting. (Graffer #2)*

Although not all graffiti crews fight, for those crews that do (as the following graffer reveals), their fights tend to be started by one crew member (usually a leader) facing off with another crew's slasher. They do this with the reassurance of knowing that their fellow crew members will back them up:

*I'm really close to the people like in my crew and they've got my back covered and I know they'll jump in if I'm going in for a smash. My crew will like back me up. That's what they're there for basically. (Graffer # 2)*

Indeed, a fundamental crew admittance requirement for many fighting crews is that the aspirant member demonstrates their willingness to fight and support the crew's leader. One 16 year old leader of three small graffiti crews stated:

*With a gang you have to like pay or fight your way in and then you have to pay or fight your way out. But with my crews, except for one which is like all your available shit kids, with my crews you have to fight your way in, but if you want out then all you have to do is like say you want out. (Graffer #6)*



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The final source of within and inter-crew rivalry injuries is when an apprehended graffer informs Police ('rats') the identity of other graffers. Once the ratting graffer's identity is known to the graffitists who were ratted upon then the ratted upon graffers will seek out the ratting graffer and '*seriously beat them up*'.

### ■ Injuries sustained as a result of graffing under the influence

While drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana are commonplace health risk activities among non-conforming adolescents they are particularly prevalent activities within the graffiti subculture. So much so that all of the study's teenaged graffers admitted to having gone on a graffiti 'bombing' spree whilst under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In most cases, they had either ended up initiating a fight, falling while graffing and injuring themselves, or being captured by Police.

Additionally, one teenager spoke of the intoxicating effect of aerosol paint can fumes. He reflected:

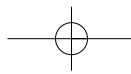
*It's the fumes from the aerosol cans. You get angrier and sharper breathing in the fumes 20 hours a week. One of my friends passed out and hit his head on the floor. (Graffer #1)*

### ■ Injuries acquired while eluding Police capture

The final commonly recounted source of graffiti injury related to the graffiti operational hazard of 'cop running' (ie. outrunning Police when chased). Given that the penalties for graffiti in Western Australia are harsh (eg. fines up to \$36,000 and/or up to 3 years imprisonment), the study's teenagers had on numerous occasions ignored the injuries they sustained while running away from Police. For example:

*I've climbed over the fence to get on the tracks to paint, but the coppers they were there all waiting. I started running and came to a fence and I thought I wasn't going to make it, but I managed to get over it and kept running. I stood on the other side eyeballing the coppers who were chasing me and then I kept running through the suburbs and they kept chasing me in their cars. I just kept going and got away. Another time, I was getting chased by the police and slashed my leg open on razor wire when I jumped a fence. I couldn't stop. I still had to continue to run and jump fences. I nearly passed out from blood loss as the wire nearly sliced a vein. (Graffer #7)*

In summary, the injuries that this study's teenaged graffitists sustained during the course of their graffiti-tagging/writing exploits were often of a serious nature and undoubtedly impacted negatively on their physical well-being. Unlike their conforming age-mates who would seek medical assistance for any injury they might sustain, this study's non-conforming teen graffers dealt with their graffiti injuries themselves (eg. making slings, binding ribs, taping wounds close) in all but the most serious of their graffiti-related injury incidents. They did this because in their words: '*Doctors ask too many questions*'. From their perspective their ability to deal with their injuries was a measure of their resilience and being resilient was vital to being success-



Myra F. Taylor

ful as a graffer. As such, the risk of serious injury was not a deterrent to engaging in high health-risk graffiti writing activities, One teenager explained:

*It's that risk. Every kid wants a risk. Everyone has risk. You could walk out your front door and get hit by a car. You know you could die that day. It's the same for me. I know I could die from painting. It's always sitting in the back of your head. I know I can die from it, but I still do it. You have to pay the consequences. The hardest thing is to keep your resilience going, but as long as you're resilient you'll succeed. (Graffer #3)*

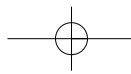
### Limitations of the study

The reported study is a single exemplar of the reflections of eight Western Australian teenaged graffitiists on the injuries they had sustained during the course of their graffiti-writing exploits. While the study fulfils its mandate of providing new insights into a poorly understood social phenomenon, its findings cannot be considered to be representative of all teenage graffitiist in all geographic locations. Many more exemplar studies of this type are needed to make such a generalisation.

### Discussion

While a sense of school belonging and feeling of connectedness correlates strongly to positive school experiences (e.g. high self-esteem, internal regulation, motivation, academic achievement, personal development and high future adult life expectations), conversely a lack of school belonging is known to correlate strongly to negative school experiences (e.g. low self-esteem, poor academic achievement, victims/perpetrators of aggressive bullying behaviours, relationship problems with parents, teachers) (Shochet *et al*, 2006; Bond *et al*, 2007; Matthews, 2008). In general, these negative experiences have been found to be severely disruptive to the student, their family and community as they impact harmfully on the students' emotional, social and mental well-being and increase the peer pressure on them to engage in high-risk activities. This is particularly true in instances where students set themselves the adolescent identity attainment goal of gaining the acceptance of a like-minded group of peers (Taylor, Houghton and Bednall, 2010).

In this regard, Reputation Enhancing Goals Theory (Carroll *et al*, 2001) states that the goals adolescents set generally sit along a continuum that ranges from an attainment desire for conforming social goals to an attainment desire for non-conforming social goals (Carroll *et al*, 2009). Whereas, some young people at the low-to-medium end of the continuum do straddle the sense of belonging school and the sense of street belonging boundaries (having one foot so as to speak in both camps), others who adopt leadership roles within the graffiti crew subculture tend to align more closely with the non-conforming social goals of young people at the high risk end of the delinquency continuum. Although, some of the present study's older high end risk teenaged graffers who had dropped out of mainstream schooling and had re-enrolled in alternative schooling revealed that their attendance goals

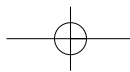


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were generally orientated towards obtaining the basic literacy skills necessary for entrance into an apprenticeship training program, other younger high end risk teenagers' alternative school attendance was aimed at keeping their parents and authorities 'off their back'. Additionally, being in a school with other at-risk students with non-conforming delinquent goals was counterintuitive as school attendance allowed them to share ideas on how to increase their visibility among the graffiti subculture and to perfect their leadership role with their own crew(s). To achieve this goal the study's teenaged graffers set themselves the tasks of placing their tags in increasingly high visibility, hard-to-reach places and in developing a core crew membership that would provide them with the protective support they needed during fights with rival crew members. Fulfilment of these dual goals provided them with the delinquent nirvana, a sense of social belonging and a social identity (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002).

In this regard, the value of the present study is that it adds to the understanding of the sense of school belonging literature by revealing the extent to which non-conforming adolescents with leadership aspirations will go to create an alternative sub-cultural sense of belonging outside of the school arena. Particularly, their willingness to engage in high health-risk activities (eg. tagging hard-to-reach places, fighting rival crews, graffing under the influence, and eluding Police capture) in their endeavours to sustain and increase their sub-cultural status. Of concern for those charged with a duty of care for these young people (eg. parents, teachers and medicos) is the extent they will go to in order to conceal any signs of their graffiti-related injuries for fear of being reported to Police. Thus, it may be that teachers need to become more proactive in sending students with unexplained injuries to the school nurse.

A somewhat surprising finding to emanate from the study was that teenaged leaders of graffiti crews view their ability to overcome the injuries they sustain during the course of their graffiti-writing exploits to be a mark of their own personal resilience. Moreover, that in order to achieve recognition and status within the graffiti community they needed to be resilient if they wanted to succeed within the graffiti subculture (ie. be accepted and respected). While, resilience is a multifaceted concept, the general consensus within the literature is that a person, regardless of vulnerabilities or risk factors, needs to experience a hardship in the presence of adversity and then demonstrate an adaptive ability to overcome the experience in order to be considered resilient (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker, 2000; Masten and Reed, 2002; Newman, 2005). Moreover, this resilient ability is enhanced when the person has access to the protective and buffering effects of certain capital resources (Masten and Reed, 2002; Pooley and Cohen, 2010). Since all of the present study's teenaged graffers had overcome the adversity of dropping out of mainstream education and had achieved a leadership position in one or more graffiti crews it would seem that they indeed had acquired a level of personal resilience.



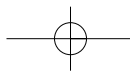
*Myra F. Taylor*

Clearly, given that resilient individuals are known to share a number of defining attributes, (eg. high self-esteem, competency, and self-efficacy, a positive self-image, active coping skills and a future orientated internal locus of control), the popular assessment of teenage graffers as being mindless 'idiots' is not accurate (Diehl and Hay, 2010). To the contrary, the study's graffers demonstrated a range of coping skills, however, the strategies they employ appear to be orientated towards Maslow's (1954) third need level (belonging) and generally seemed more problem-focused (ie. eliminating problems by confronting them – for example, fighting rivals); avoidance-focused (ie. avoiding unpleasant issues in the hope they will sort themselves out – for example, the rising number of charges laid against them); and emotion-focused, than they were cognitive-focused (ie. showing evidence of forethought and long-term consequence planning) (Ben-Zur, 2009). Indeed, it would seem from the confidence that the study's teen graffiti crew leaders displayed in their ability to overcome the daily challenges that beset them, they were responding to Maslow's (1954) fourth 'self-esteem' level of human need. Thus, future research may well seek to determine whether graffiti crew leaders' resilient coping strategies and self-esteem attributes are lower, equivalent or higher than their conforming age-mates (Maud, 2004).

This study also reveals that greater recognition needs to be given to the other positive attributes of some of society's consummate young risk-takers. Clearly, they are goal orientated, have well developed leadership qualities, and their human developmental needs are not being met within the conventional educational format. Therefore, it may well be that any solution to the problem of school disaffection and the acquisition of an alternative sense of belonging needs to be tackled from a multi-agency perspective and not from a deficit model (Carroll, Green and Houghton, 2003; Welsh *et al*, 2002). Wherein, intervention programs are instigated that focus on providing young people engaged in antisocial/illegal acts with opportunities to productively use their 'street' skills, rather than simply ignoring their potential and consigning them to society's scrapheap of discarded youth..

## **Conclusions**

Perhaps the societal challenge is thus not whether we can always foster in every student a strong sense of school belonging (ie. feeling accepted) and community connectedness (ie. linked to the prevailing social ethos), but rather how can we put in place bridging inclusion pathways that allow resilient, but disaffected young people to traverse the divide between conforming to the social ethos of the prevailing community and adhering to the alternative mores of the street community with which they have already bonded. Clearly, society cannot afford to disregard its young people who have demonstrable leadership qualities.

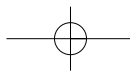


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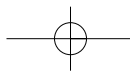
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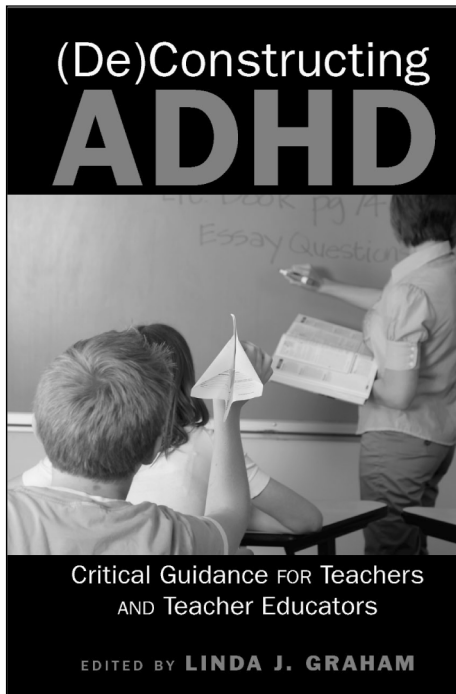
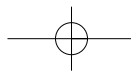
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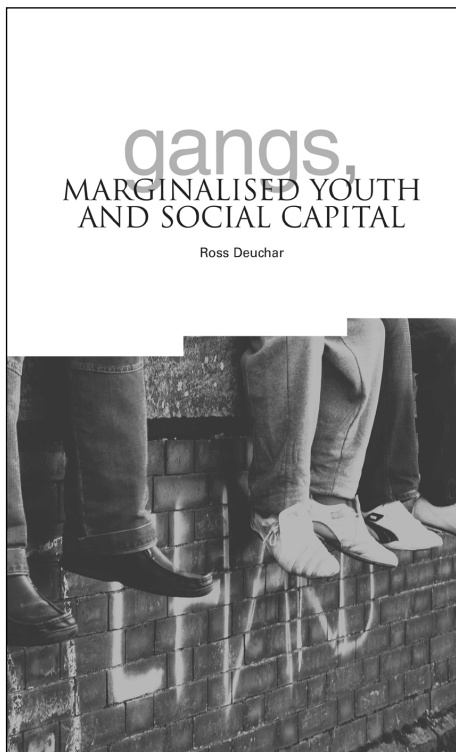
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