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An Examination of At Risk High School Students' Perceptions of the Factors that Foster Resiliency in Their Suburban High School

Dionne Johnson-Olamiju
St. John Fisher College

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An Examination of At Risk High School Students’ Perceptions of the Factors that Foster Resiliency in Their Suburban High School

Abstract
Research has continued to indicate that students’ academic success is determined by their socioeconomic status. In responding to the challenges faced by youth living in poverty, researchers have focused on identifying factors that provide supportive resources and protective mechanisms for fostering healthy development and learning success of at risk children and youth. The research described in this study involved qualitative research methodologies and grounded theory to examine at-risk high school students’ perceptions of their school’s ability to foster a culture of resilience. The purpose of the study was to identify those protective factors crucial for fostering educational resilience for at risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school. The research uncovered the presence of reflective reciprocity syndrome, which was identified as the paralleled or mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students are reflective of students’ responses to teachers. Recommendations include raising educators’ awareness of the presence of reflective reciprocity syndrome in order to combat its negative effects in order to serve all students.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/168
An Examination of At Risk High School Students’ Perceptions of the Factors that Foster Resiliency in Their Suburban High School

By

Dionne Johnson-Olamiju

Submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Pamela Davis

Committee Member:
Dr. Sandy Johnson

Ralph C. Wilson. Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

August, 2013
Dedication

This dissertation journey could not have been successfully completed without the support of numerous supportive people. I would first like to express my gratitude to my husband, Segun, for his unwavering and unconditional kindness and support throughout this dissertation process. His steadfast love and understanding were integral to my overcoming challenges and hurdles during this process. I look forward to spending more time on the deck, barbequing with you.

My daughter, Brianna, a college junior, was a motivating and inspirational force that propelled me to successfully complete this doctoral program. She continuously showered me with love and support, and this dissertation is meant to reinforce to her that goals can be accomplished through hard work. I am with you as you work tirelessly to accomplishing your goal of becoming a medical doctor. Additionally, Brianna, I see your face in the faces of all of my students. This helps me to be a more caring and effective school administrator. Thank You!!

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to my parents, Leroy and Paulette Johnson for supporting me by providing food, shelter, and encouragement during each of my weekend classes.

Thank you to Cohort 3 for their relentless commitment that no one would be left behind and for their steadfast reassurance during challenging times.
Dr. Sandra Malonado-Jackson, my team member and friend, thank you for always celebrating my little gains. I will forever be touched by your kindness and generosity. We started together and we finished together. I look forward to our future collaborations.

Thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Pamela Davis, and my committee member Dr. Sandy Johnson, for guiding my dissertation journey by offering insights, guidance, and encouragement. Thank you for holding steadfast to deadlines.

I would like to express my gratitude to each of the program’s instructors for their expertise, wisdom and dedication to the students. You were correct when you stated that this dissertation program initiates a transformation in each student. I am indeed transformed and inspired to affect positive change in the lives of my students.

At the conclusion of this dissertation journey, I am even more resolved in my commitment to be a staunch advocate for my at-risk students who for too long have been marginalized and discounted. I pledge to use my expertise, knowledge, and acumen to continue to ensure that they have access to factors that will prepare them for college and careers.
Biographical Sketch

Dionne Johnson-Olamiju is currently an Assistant Principal at a school district located in the Hudson Valley in New York. Ms. Johnson-Olamiju attended Lehman College from 1988 to 1992 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1992. She attended The College of New Rochelle from 2003 to 2005 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in 2005. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2011 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms Johnson-Olamiju pursued her research of an examination of at risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school under the direction of Dr. Pamela Davis and Dr. Sandy Johnson and received the Ed.D. degree in 2013.
Abstract

Research has continued to indicate that students’ academic success is determined by their socioeconomic status. In responding to the challenges faced by youth living in poverty, researchers have focused on identifying factors that provide supportive resources and protective mechanisms for fostering healthy development and learning success of at-risk children and youth. The research described in this study involved qualitative research methodologies and grounded theory to examine at-risk high school students’ perceptions of their school’s ability to foster a culture of resilience. The purpose of the study was to identify those protective factors crucial for fostering educational resilience for at risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school. The research uncovered the presence of reflective reciprocity syndrome, which was identified as the paralleled or mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students are reflective of students’ responses to teachers. Recommendations include raising educators’ awareness of the presence of reflective reciprocity syndrome in order to combat its negative effects in order to serve all students.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) reported that White students achieve higher scores than Black students, on average, on all standardized assessments. Additionally data showed that minority students, especially African American and Latino students, drop out of high school at more than three times the rate of their White counterparts (Aud, Hussar, Kena, & Roth, 2012; Laird, Kienzl, DeBell, & Chapman, 2007).

Resilience has been identified as an integral element of academic achievement. Resilience has been defined as the ability to succeed educationally despite adverse experiences such as poverty or abuse and has been identified by characteristics such as confidence, a sense of well-being, motivation, an ability to set goals, relationships/connections, and stress management. (McLemore, 2010).

Research has disclosed significant connections between resilience and academic success (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006). In a longitudinal study, Scales et al. (2006) found that there was a persuasive correlation between higher levels of resiliency traits and higher grade point averages (GPAs) among middle and high school students.

The focus of the research described in this dissertation was to study the factors that are critical in fostering resilience in at-risk Black and Hispanic high school students by examining students’ perceptions of the level of resiliency support in their school. The research was inspired by a desire to impact student achievement by creating within these
students the drive to persevere despite self-created, social, familial, economic, or institutionalized obstacles.

**Problem Statement**

Black and Hispanic students have not been making adequate yearly progress in the areas of English Language Arts and Mathematics as compared to their White counterparts. (New York State Report Card, 2009) National statistics are consistent with those of New York State (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Research has continued to indicate that students’ academic success is closely aligned with their socioeconomic status (Rothstein, 2004; Williams, Davis, Miller-Cribbs, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). Children who are born in economically disadvantaged environments have been more likely to test lower and achieve less than their same age economically advantaged peers (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Rothstein, 2004).

The achievement disparity does not begin in kindergarten; rather it has been demonstrated to start at birth and continue through early childhood and beyond. Evidence continued to show the significance of the initial level of readiness of children as they enter kindergarten; however, children vary in school readiness capacity, and these disproportions were influenced by socioeconomic backgrounds (Rothstein, 2004). National assessments indicated a disparity in school readiness between young White children and young Black and Hispanic children in the United States (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005).

Many economically disadvantaged children have succeeded academically and socially despite severe situations and obstacles. It has been critical that teachers
understand the concept of resiliency and those factors that foster resilience. Additionally, teachers have needed to model resiliency, and “move from the knowledge of their own resilience to the practice of building resilience in the classroom” (Dill & Stafford-Johnson, 2003)

**Resilience Theoretical Rationale**

Schools often have attributed the underachievement of minority students on social, psychological, family, and community factors as well as educational programmatic factors. (Herbert, 1999) Too often schools have discounted the role of parents as partners, and instead have regarded them as adversaries instead of advocates of children’s education (Huang & Gibbs, 1992). Byram (2005) postulated, “for many educators, the minority achievement gap, especially in urban areas, has come to be accepted as normative and they perceive little hope for transformation in these schools’.

Herbert (1999) posited that minority students in urban schools face the socio-cultural-political challenges and barriers that create multifaceted, complex, and seemingly overpowering obstacles to both academic success and home, school and community partnerships. In response to the problem of minority children and low-achievement, Education Trust (2001) published research on the high academic achievement of more than 4,500 high-performing, high minority, and high poverty schools. A common theme for high minority, high performing schools was the school, home, and community partnership. (Education Trust, 2001).

School-family-community partnerships have been consistently identified as significant facilitators of the protective factors that foster educational resilience in children (Benard, 1995; Reschly, 2010; Wang et al., 1997, 1998). The social-family-
community partnerships, also referred to as “social capital,” have been shown to provide strength and support for families, which in turn fosters academic success for children (Epstein & Saunders, 2000). De Souza Briggs (1997) defined social capital as “resources stored in human relationships whether casual or close or the stuff we draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish things that matter to us and to solve everyday problems” (p. 12).

Research indicated that resiliency in children can be fostered and nurtured by providing protective factors in their environments (Benard 1991, 1995; Wang et al., 1997). Benard (1991) posited that resilience was not derived from any innate quality but rather it was derived from interactions and relations in the environment. Resilience was described by Bernard (1991) as the product of a child’s instinctive capacity for self-righting and the environment’s protective factors.

Benard (2007) suggested that resilience unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental attributes. These environmental attributes or protective factors reduced the negative effects of adversity and stressful life events. The key protective factors that cultivated resiliency in children were caring and supportive relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high parent and teacher expectations regarding student performance and future success (Benard 1995, 1997; Wang et al., 1997, 1998).

Herbert (1999) discussed a study of 18 culturally diverse, high-achieving students in an urban high school. The students were asked to identify the factors that propelled them to academic success. The factors that they identified as influential in their academic success were supportive adults at home, at school, and in the community; extracurricular
after-school activities; challenging educational experiences; a supportive group of achieving peers; and a strong belief in and sense of self.

Resiliency research began with the study of children at risk for psychopathology due to maternal diagnosis and who faced significant odds and adversities. (Cicchetti, 2003; Garmezy, 1974; Werner & Smith, 1992). The findings of these studies revealed that the children in these adverse environments succeeded despite the odds. The evidence led to additional research into identifying what factors were significant in mitigating the stressors and facilitated successful adaption (Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992; Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003). Even though it is important that we have recognized the challenges that at-risk students in schools are faced with, it is imperative that we continue to identify protective factors that facilitated success for at-risk students.

**Systems-ecological theory of resilience.** The dissertation study was driven by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) systems-ecological theory and Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that successful development was the result of positive interactions within a child’s contextual environments that included both internal and external influences.

Environments that influence the child included family, peer relationships, school environments, and the community and its resources (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 2003). As the child develops, the interactions within the environment were shown to become more complex and challenging. These interactions influenced the child’s way of thinking, behaving, and feeling (Harvey & Delfabo, 2004). Bandura (1991) postulated, “personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived
self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them” (p. 118). Bandura also stated that people with a high sense of efficacy envision themselves in successful outcomes and those who doubt their abilities to succeed, visualize themselves in failing scenarios.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the dissertation study was to conduct qualitative research using grounded theory to examine at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the level of resiliency in their school and to thereby identify protective factors that were crucial for fostering educational resilience for at-risk, 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school. The identification of these factors may help educators design more effective educational interventions for struggling students.

Research Questions

The dissertation research explored the following research questions:

1. What are successful at-risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?

2. What are less successful at-risk successful students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?

3. What protective factors foster educational resilience for at risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school?

Significance of the Study

James, Jurich and Estes (2001) indicated that as “school districts continue to disaggregate and publicize their student achievement data, a complex picture of disparities is emerging. Wealthy, well-resourced suburban communities have been
‘shocked’ to discover that even in their comfortable middle and upper class communities academic achievement goals for all are not attained” (p. 23).

Suburban minority school children have not been achieving as well as their White counterparts. In fact, the academic achievement gaps in many suburban communities rarely have been discussed and have been significantly larger than the disparities in urban schools. (Alson, 2003).

The dissertation research was significant because there has been a paucity of research conducted to examine protective factors that foster educational resilience for at risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school in New York State. The purpose of the qualitative research described in this dissertation was to offer information that can be used by educational institutions seeking to understand factors that enhance academic achievement for at-risk students. The research was conducted by analyzing the perceptions of at-risk students about factors that foster resilience in their suburban high school.

Definitions of Terms

At risk. According to Chen and Kaufman (1997), students were considered at risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Lowest socioeconomic quartile,
- Single parent family,
- Older sibling dropped out of school,
- Changed schools two or more times,
- Average grades of C’s or lower from sixth to eighth grade, and
- Repeated a grade.
**Educational resilience.** Educational resilience was defined as the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994).

**Protective factors.** Protective factors were defined as assets that individuals actively used to cope with, adapt to, or overcome vulnerability or risks (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1991).

**Resilience.** Resilience was defined as the ability to thrive or bounce back from adverse experiences (Bland et al., 1991). Children who coped effectively with internal and external stressors were considered resilient (Ford, 1994).

**Chapter Summary**

The resilience paradigm and its implications have been important in facilitating students’ academic achievement because a school environment that promotes resilience in students and staff can provide strong protective factors that lead to academic achievement for all students, including students who are at risk for academic failure (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). The intention of the research described in this dissertation was to identify themes that emerged from the analysis of collected qualitative data in order to develop a grounded theory on at-risk students’ perspectives on protective factors in suburban high schools.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature, chapter 3 includes an explanation of the research methodology used to answer the research questions, chapter 4 contains the data analysis, and chapter 5 contains a discussion of the implications of the research and recommendations for practice and future research.
Chapter 2: Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), instituted greater accountability to schools for ensuring adequate academic opportunities for all students and thereby reducing the achievement gap. NCLB mandated public school districts to report performance data from standardized achievement tests from the various student subgroup classifications, including ethnicity, limited English proficiency, disability, and economic disadvantage (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Challenges of Suburban Schools

Although children of color in suburban districts outperform their racial peers in urban districts, the disparity in achievement gap between White and minority students in suburban districts is wider than it is nationally (College Board, 1999).

The academic achievement disparities of the suburbs were the results of diverse demographics. The 2000 Census disclosed that during the 1990s there was a significant upsurge in racial and ethnic diversity in American suburbs. Many immigrants settled in suburban “melting pot metro” areas (Frey, 2003). Frey (2003) defined melting pot metros as metropolitan areas with a significantly higher percentage of minorities than other areas and where more than two out of five residents were minorities. The rapid growth in minority students and flat growth among White students in many suburban school districts resulted in those schools being designated as majority-minority school districts (Frey, 2001).
The emerging configurations of the suburbs as a result of racial and ethnic minority suburbanization have been linked to increasing suburban school segregation. (Reardon & Yun, 2001). This new pattern had a significant impact on the suburban schools’ student demographics with trends that indicated school segregation. Fry, (2009a, 2009b) identified data that illustrated that minority enrollment growth had prominently altered the racial and ethnic composition of suburban school districts. The data showed that minority students’ enrollment significantly increased in suburban schools between 1993 and 2007 with suburban schools, on average, shifting from 72% White to 59% White, from 12% Black to 15% Black, from 11% Hispanic to 20% Hispanic, and from 5% Asian to 6% Asian.

The mandates of NCLB have been challenging for children of immigrants, LEP students, and the schools serving them. As a result of community and school segregation by race, ethnicity, and income, many schools have become linguistically segregated. (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwantoro, 2005).

More than 50% of limited English proficiency (LEP) students attended schools where over 30% of their classmates were LEP; on the other hand, 57% of English proficient students attended schools where less than 1% of all students were LEP (Van Hook & Fix, 2000).

Concerns about inequality in student achievement and its impact on ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged children and youth have inspired research geared to identifying factors that lead to academic attainment for low-income and ethnic minority children (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2002; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Dryfoos, 1994; Edmonds, 1979; Solomon, Battistich, Watson,
Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). The fundamental theme in these studies was that protective factors incorporated in the schools were able to mitigate the obstacles that children faced in their homes and communities, thereby contributing to the educational success of at-risk students.

At-risk students in schools encountered daily challenges associated with living in communities, homes, and school environments that may not provide adequate social and emotional support. Students who struggled academically were at greater risk for the onset of behavioral and mental health problems (Noam & Hermann, 2002). The potential for severe achievement deficits existed for many children, youth, and families, particularly those in at-risk circumstances, such as the economically disadvantaged. The quality of life for those children and families was threatened by a perilous set of challenges that often included lack of employment opportunities and disorderly and stressful environments.

**Theoretical Perspective**

An ecological perspective supported the importance of identifying protective factors in the environment that help children and youth cope with stressors in their lives (Rutter, 1990). Identifying protective factors for at-risk youths could potentially contribute to addressing the multiple risk factors that adversely impact their development, coping, and functioning.

Garmezy and Rutter (1983) argued that the potential for prevention lies in the increasing knowledge and understanding about why some children were not damaged by life’s challenges and stresses. By examining internal and external factors, it may be
possible to determine which protective factors alleviated stressors and risk factors, thus assisting at-risk youth in overcoming adversities.

At-risk students in schools have faced day-to-day challenges of living in communities, homes, and school environments that may not provide adequate social and emotional support. Students who struggle academically have increased susceptibility for the development of behavioral and mental health problems (Noam & Hermann, 2002).

The enactment of NCLB has increased schools’ accountability in raising academic achievement for at risk students. This has resulted in the challenge for schools to implement strategies and initiatives to improve academic outcomes for these students and thereby close the achievement gap. In responding to such challenges, researchers focused on factors that strengthen the resources and protective mechanisms for fostering healthy development and learning success of children and youth, and in the past several years, researchers uncovered sources of educational resilience for students who face a variety of risks.

Educational resilience has been defined as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994). In the 1970s researchers became interested in children who experienced positive results in life despite adverse circumstances. Resilience studies began with children who, because of parental factors including psychopathology, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, and family dysfunction, were at risk of suffering from the long term effects of these adverse conditions (Garmezy et al., 1984; Werner, 1984).
Researchers involved in the early studies of resilience searched for evidence of adaptive behaviors in the midst of risk factors (Garmezy et al. 1984). The interest in researching resilience was generated in the 1950s by Garmezy who was concerned about the prognosis for children considered to be at risk based on the psychopathology of their mothers, particularly mothers with schizophrenia. Garmezy found that the majority of children showed high levels of competence. In a landmark study, Werner and Smith (1998) employed the term ‘resiliency’ to describe individuals who are able to ‘bounce back’ from adversity and overcome insurmountable odds to survive and thrive. The resilience paradigm postulated that a seed of resiliency exists in everyone and that the development of resilience was a result of healthy human development (Bernard, 1999). Bernard (1998) argued, “resilience is not a generic trait that only a few 'superkids' possess…rather it is our inborn capacity for self-righting and for transformation and change” (p. 3).

The theoretical aspects of resilience was researched and articulated in the past decades; yet, a lack of consensus continued to prevail regarding the many aspects of resilience, the variability of resilience as a trait or a process, and the measurement of resilience (Luther, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000). Research on resilience not only garnered great interest in the context of academic achievement for at-risk students, but it also received increasing interest from those involved with policy and practice because of its potential impact on health, well-being, and quality of life. (Haskett, Nears, Ward, & McPherson, 2006). The interest in resilience was due to a paradigm shift from “deficit” models of illness and psychopathology to a theory that focused on understanding healthy
development despite risk and on cultivating strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005)

Resilience research concentrated on at-risk children and youths who showed academic, emotional, and social competence despite adversity and stress. Most of the research has been dedicated to identifying factors that foster competence in children and youths who are at risk. (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Nettles & Pleck, 1994; Wang & Gordon, 1994. Competence was defined by Masten and Coatsworth (1998) as “a track record of effective performance in developmental tasks that are salient for people of a given age, society, or context.” Garmezy et al. (1984) defined stress resistance as the development of competence in children in spite of their exposure to risk factors.

A longitudinal study that focused on nearly 700 children born into families of high risk revealed that the majority of the children grew up to be competent adults (Werner & Smith, 1992). According to Werner and Smith (1992), those findings combined with data from cross-sectional research, suggested that a set of protective factors appeared to play a significant role in fostering resilience in children and adolescence across diverse situations. The identified factors included: connections to other competent adults, good intellectual skills, self-efficacy, effective schools and other community assets, and religious faith. The processes by which the factors functioned have not been well researched.

In responding to the need to better understand resilience, researchers have been focusing on specifying factors that strengthen the resources and protective mechanisms for fostering healthy development and learning success of children and youth.
Additionally, researchers have begun to uncover sources of educational resilience for students who face a variety of risks.

Educational resilience has been defined as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994). Obstacles to learning such as poverty, alcohol and drug use, family dysfunction, and mental illness have continued to adversely impact student achievement and perplex educators who have been attempting to close the achievement gap (Bosworth & Waltz, 2005). Doll & Lyon (1998) suggested that schools have a responsibility to provide protective environments that encourage the development of educational resilience.

Because children spend an enormous amount of time in school, researchers contended that it is the responsibility of educators to facilitate the development of educational resilience in children. Concerns about the challenges and obstacles faced by ethnic minority and low-income children have led educators, researchers, and politicians to examine the ways schools can foster resilience and produce better academic outcomes (Downey, 2008; Learning First Alliance, 2001; Nettles & Robinson, 1998; Picucci et al., 2002; Wang et al., 1994, Wang et al., 1998).

Since schools have been the primary institutions that focus on promoting the cognitive development of the child, it is logical to focus on the school environment for its impact on the educational outcomes of at-risk students (Brooks, 2010). Given the challenges faced by at-risk students, research on resilience included suggestions that risks can be mitigated by certain assets within the individual and within the environment that supports resilience.
Benard (2004) identified four individual-level traits of resilient children: (a) social competence, (b) problem-solving skills, (c) autonomy, and (d) a sense of purpose and future. However, these traits were regarded not as the cause of resilience but as outcomes of healthy youth development. Benard also identified three key protective factors within the environment that contribute to healthy youth development and enhance resiliency in children: (a) a caring and supportive environment, (b) high positive expectations along with the support needed to meet those expectations, and (c) ongoing opportunities for meaningful involvement and responsibility that enable children to have some control over their lives. Benard (2003) attributed the three environmental factors with “turnaround teachers and schools” that facilitate closing the achievement gap. She argued that teachers and schools can foster resilience among at-risk youths by incorporating these three protective factors into the school environment.

Weissberg and O’Brien (2004) defined the broad mission of schools as developing young people who are “knowledgeable, responsible, healthy, caring, connected, and contributing” (p. 87). They recommended the comprehensive integration of social, emotional, and academic supports as the most effective means to realize that developmental goal.

Academic success may be viewed theoretically as a result of a complex interplay among numerous factors reflecting multiple levels of young people’s ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, school success is cultivated when protective factors are instituted to provide caring and supportive relationships in the school community, increase student motivation and engagement, increase the value that students place on education, increase the effectiveness of students’ study habits, strengthen social norms
and expectations that promote achievement, and increase parent involvement and student attendance (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999).

**Resilience.** For many years, researchers focused solely on the negative effects of biological and psychosocial risk factors (Werner, 2005). The deficit-based approach purported that a negative outcome is inevitable if a child is exposed to an environment afflicted with risk factors such as poverty, alcoholism, or parental mental illness. The paradigm shift from a focus on weaknesses to the identification of strengths has generated competency models in psychology and psychiatry (Richardson, Neiger, Jenson, & Kumpfer, 1990). Longitudinal studies conducted over the last two decades facilitated the change because the studies established that among children exposed to multiple stressors, only a small percentage developed serious long-term emotional effects. The term resilience was introduced in those studies and has been recognized as an important construct from a theoretical and applied perspective (Luther, 2006). Luther (2006) posited that two conditions are critical when defining resilience: (a) exposure to significant adversity or threat, and (b) achievement of positive adaptation despite the adversity or threat.

The topic of resilience gained recognition in research with children of schizophrenic mothers. The researchers found that among children who were at high-risk for psychopathology, there were a number of children who had shown surprisingly healthy adaptive patterns (Garmezy, 1974) Garmezy (1974) found that the majority of the children studied showed high levels of competence. The initial research associated resilient adaptation to factors that were external to the child. Three protective factors originally cited were characteristics of the children, aspects of their families, and
characteristics of their social environments (Garmezy, 1987; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992).

Early studies identified children who thrived in spite of challenges and obstacles as “invulnerable” (Anthony, 1987). Researchers changed the term to “resilience” because resilient behavior is seen as not fixed but as varying over time. It was apparent that positive adaptation despite challenges is not permanent but is a developmental evolution dependent on life’s experiences. (Garmezy & Masten, 1986; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Competence was defined by Masten and Coatsworth (1998) as “a track record of effective performance in developmental tasks that are salient for people of a given age, society, or context. Garmezy (1974) defined stress resistance as the development of competence in children in spite of their exposure to risk factors.

Rutter (1987) identified four main protective processes that mitigate risks at key life turning points: (a) reduce the impact of risk by altering the experience of risk or exposure to the risk, (b) minimize the number of risk factors in order to avoid an accumulation of unmanageable risks, (c) enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy in order to create a positive chain reaction in a young person’s life, and (d) provide access to opportunities such as part-time work and afterschool activities in order to increase confidence and develop necessary life skills.

Gilligan (2000) accentuated Rutter’s protective processes by emphasizing the importance of five key areas that foster resilience in at-risk young people and children: (a) decrease the number of problems in the child’s life, (b) think about the child’s life course in terms of a developmental pathway, (c) provide the child with a secure base, (d) develop self-esteem through positive experiences, and (e) self-efficacy.
**Self-efficacy.** Bandura (1977) posited that not only can perceived self-efficacy profoundly influence choice of activities and settings, but through expectations of eventual success, self-efficacy can also impact coping efforts. Bandura also stated that efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. Bandura identified self-efficacy as a key factor to fostering resilience. He described self-efficacy as beliefs about one’s own ability to successfully perform a given task or behavior. These self-beliefs of efficacy provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being and personal accomplishment (Pajares, 2002). Bandura argued that individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions such that what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave.

Based on Bandura’s (1977) theory, self-efficacy has been seen as helping to determine whether behavior will be initiated, the amount of effort that will be expended to attain an outcome, the level of persistence applied to a task, and the length of time it will be maintained in the face of obstacles and setbacks (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs impact virtually every aspect of people’s lives including how they feel about themselves, their vulnerability to stress and depression, and the life choices they make (Pajares, 2002).

Bandura (1977) explained that self-efficacy is best promoted through mastery of new experiences. He argued that when students become convinced they are instrumental in their learning success, they work harder to overcome obstacles. Furthermore, Bandura viewed self-efficacy from a social cognitive perspective and believed that self-efficacy could be learned from observation, modeling, and behavior modification.
Thomas (2000) purported that since the school has been the primary focus in the life of the child, it should be considered a significant agent for the development of self-efficacy and the school staff should be responsible for the creation of a culture where the success of students is attainable. According to Thomas, children develop in the context of many systems including families, peer groups, schools, communities, and societies.

**Ecological perspective of resilience.** Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited, in his bioecological systems theory, that the development of a person is based on, “the evolving interaction between the developing person and their environment” (p. 3). He perceived human development as a “lasting change in the way a person perceives and deals with his environment” (p. 3). Bronfenbrenner’s theory is salient in that at-risk children are faced with a host of adversities such as poverty, abuse and neglect, parental chemical dependency, divorce, foster home placement, homelessness, chaotic and dangerous neighborhoods, discrimination based on race, class and gender, and domestic abuse. Many of them are raised in difficult family and social environments; however some overcome adversities and lead satisfying lives (Gilgun, 1999). The presence of risk factors predict that a percentage of an at-risk group will experience adverse outcome; however, even though persons with risks are vulnerable to an associated outcome, the presence of risk factors cannot predict that any one person in an at-risk group will experience a negative outcome (Best & Garmezy, 1991; Masten, 1994).

Individuals can experience environmental risks such as childhood maltreatment or an individual may inherit genetic risks such as those predisposing them to particular type of physiological response, but they may not have the associated outcomes. Individuals in an at-risk group, however, are vulnerable to that outcome. The concept of vulnerability
can be associated to individuals who are members of at-risk groups (Masten, 1994, Masten & Garmezy, 1985). Developmental psychopathologists argued that other factors counter the effects of risk factors when vulnerable persons do not experience the associated outcome (Gilgin, 1996). Furthermore, some people experience multiple risks (Masten, 1994; Seifer & Sameroff, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). In some cases, increased risks inundate the resources of an individual, while in other cases persons appear to have the resources to endure. (Gilgin, 1996). Researchers viewed assets as factors associated with positive outcomes. They were identified as “the positive counterparts of risk” (Masten, 1994, p.6).

Assets, like risks, are statistical concepts. Low socioeconomic status was considered a risk factor for unsuccessful outcomes, whereas high socioeconomic status was considered an asset (Masten, 1994). However, not all persons with assets, such as high IQ, physical attractiveness, verbal facility, parents who care, safe neighborhoods, and good socioeconomic backgrounds, turn out well. Likewise not all people from economically disadvantaged families and impoverished neighborhoods have maladaptive outcomes (Jarrett, 1994, 1995; Richters & Martinez, 1993). Masten et al. (1991) claimed that protective factors are identifiable assets that individuals actively use to cope with, adapt to, or overcome vulnerability or risks. Assets have been associated with positive outcomes when individuals have been exposed to risks (Masten et al., 1991).

Resilience, defined as a set of adaptive behaviors and as internalized capacities, has come to represent positive outcomes when risks are present. Developmentally, resilience has meant coping with, recovering from, or overcoming adversity (Masten et al., 1991). Individuals who are resilient cope through flexible problem-solving and help-
seeking behaviors rather than rigid and brittle responses to stress and other adversities (Cohler, 1987). However, resilience has not necessarily been found to be present across all situations and adversities. Some people may be resilient because they have not encountered challenges that overwhelm their resources (Cohler, 1987). People who were resilient at one point in their lives may at other times be overwhelmed by adverse circumstances (Luthar, Doernberger, & Zigler, 1993). Conversely, people who did not adapt well at one point may become adaptive when they have social, emotional and economic resources and when opportunities for work and education opportunities become open (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1986; Werner, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Constructionist theory of resilience. Research on resilience has been overwhelmingly driven through ecological systems theory, which emphasized predictable relationships between risk and protective factors, circular causality, and transactional processes that foster resilience (Unger, 2004). Within an ecological paradigm, resilience has been defined as healthy development despite adversity (Masten, 2001).

In contrast, the constructionist theorists defined resilience as “the outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse” (Unger, 2004). Constructionists also viewed the social ecological perspective as positivistic in nature because of the generalized resilient risk and protective factors. Constructionists argued that resilience was predicated on the concept of ableism, which emerged from the disabled people’s rights movement (Campbell, 2008, 2009; Hughes, 2007; Overboe, 1999; Wolbring, 2008). The concept of ableism was built on understandings of the sociocultural definition of ability.
Normative behaviors aligned with resilience were perceived by constructionists to be defined by the hegemony of society. Thus, normative behaviors were considered discriminatory because the diverse nature in which resilience is manifested, nurtured, and maintained was disregarded. Ableism reflected the sentiment of social groups and social structures that valued and promoted certain abilities that demonstrated resilience. These abilities included productivity and competitiveness over empathy, compassion, and kindness. (Wolbring, 2008) The preference for certain abilities over others lead to a labeling of real or perceived deviations from identified essential abilities as a diminished state of being. The preference for particular abilities contributed to the marginalization of groups of people (Wolbring, 2008). Ableism can be considered as both hegemonic, which promoted ability preference, and as an analytical tool used to understand the preferences and impact of those preferences (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Campbell (2009) contended that ableism has been used to justify present and historic inequalities, and justified the rejection of “different” or “peripheral: ways of functioning and existing. The challenge of measuring resilience in different contexts, problems discerning valid definitions of positive outcomes, and difficulty developing effective interventions congruent with the experiences of marginalized populations were weaknesses of ecologically based approaches to researching and enhancing resilience (Gilgun, 1999).

Constructionists also commented on the issue of definitional ambiguity of the term resilience by ecologists. The constructivists argued that when designing studies, ecologists must decide if resilience would be defined as normative levels of coping in exceptionally difficult circumstances, above level coping when there are normative levels of stress, or exceptional levels of functional adaptation in circumstances of heightened
risk exposure (Unger, 2004). The argument became more complex because the normative definition of health and well-being are context specific (Martineau, 1999, Unger, 2000). Constructionists declared that it is paramount that researchers take into consideration the contextual specificity of resilience, such as race, gender, class, ability and other factors when identifying resilience. Kaplan (1999) stated, “It is possible that the socially defined desirable outcomes may be subjectively defined as desirable. The individual may be manifesting resilience, while from the social point of view the individual may be manifesting vulnerability” (pp. 31-32). The constructionist discourse offered an alternative perspective on resilience where contextual specificity is recognized as

Educational resilience. The effects of poverty, violence, family, and neighborhood conditions have increased the likelihood that urban children will enter school without the skills, competencies, and emotional intelligence they require to attain success (Corrigan & Udas, 1996). Furthermore, the intertwining of social obstacles and stressors have posed challenges for educators as they attempt to address the disparities in academic achievement for at-risk students. Children who experience stressors such as poverty, abuse, neglect, violence, and other traumatic life events are often more predisposed to develop emotional problems than children from less stressful environments. However, in spite of tremendous life pressures, many children considered to have a predisposition to develop social or psychological disorders have demonstrated resilience (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003).
Schools have been held accountable in meeting the academic and social needs of minority and poor students. Schools serving a disproportionate number of at risk students have been compelled to incorporate innovative strategies aimed at reducing the barriers and obstacles to academic achievement for such students. Thus, schools that serve students who are at risk for academic deficits need to establish nurturing environments. Barr and Parrett (1995) argued that schools must create “educational intensive care units” (p. 60) geared to instill and cultivate the characteristics and traits that at risk students need to succeed.

The lives of a disproportionate number of at-risk students have been plagued with oppression, devoid of privileges, and have been too often, “neglected, labeled, and left to wither in the lowest tracks in our schools” (Lewis & Arnold, 1998, p. 60). Winfield (1994) argued that urban educators must change practice to include strategies to foster and build students’ protective processes during crucial and challenging times in their lives. Wang et al. (1994) suggested that effective educators—particularly those in the inner cities—must incorporate instructional strategies that promote the self-efficacy, independence and a sense of belonging among urban youth. “These urban teenagers need resources that are embedded within the school’s support mechanisms in order to learn the positive coping mechanisms that are inherent in resilient students” (Wang & Gordon, 1994).

Moreover, Kincheloe (2004) and Winfield (1993) proposed that schools should develop and implement programs that foster and cultivate resilience instead of the current programs that concentrate solely on academic deficits. The movement of strength-based student guidance has the power to transform the culture and concentration of urban
schools. There were clear indications that teacher expectations can and do affect student’s achievement and attitudes (Good & Brophy, 1997; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Brophy’s (1982) research on urban education led to the identification of factors that influence effectiveness in working with urban children. One such factor was teacher expectations and a sense of self-efficacy. Brophy suggested that effective teachers believe that all children can learn and that they are capable of teaching them successfully. Low or negative expectations have been found to hinder urban children’s access to quality educational opportunities, learning, and achievement levels, as well as their development of self-concept (Good & Brophy, 1997).

The school environment is an important setting in the development of a child. Schools have functioned as a vitally important context for child development, while at the same time a classroom or school also can be viewed as a system that may be threatened by adversities (Masten & Powell, 2003). The schools that are successful in spite of adversity are said to “manifest resilience” (Masten & Powell, 2003). The resilience levels of the faculty in the school environment has been shown to be integral because not only does the faculty determine the school’s resilience level, but they also serve as resources in fostering resilience in the lives of disadvantaged students.

Studies have been conducted to evaluate the implications of resilience not only in education but also in the health care industry and have shown that similar to teachers, oncology nurses have been adversely affected by work related stresses and respond by leaving their jobs. Of those who remained, some used negative coping strategies such as distancing or avoidance (Grafton, Gillespie & Henderson, 2010). Others were able to remain in context, thrive, and find satisfaction despite ongoing workplace stress (Corley,
2002; Jackson, Firtko, & Edenbourogh, 2007). These studies indicated that educators too should maintain a high level of resilience to counteract the daily stresses associated with their responsibilities.

Students at risk of academic failure often face a complexity of problems caused by poverty, health and other social conditions that have made it difficult for them to succeed in school. One area of research that has had important implications for the educational improvement of students at risk of academic failure focused on “resilient” students or those students who succeeded in school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Gray, Padron, & Waxman, 2003). The construct of “educational resilience” was not viewed as a fixed attribute but as something to be promoted by focusing on “alterable” factors that can impact an individual’s success in school. This approach did not focus on attributes such as ability because ability has not necessarily been found to be a characteristic of resilient students (Benard, 1993; Gordon & Song, 1994; Masten et al., 1991).

Benard (1993) established that there are four personal characteristics that resilient children typically display. The characteristics were social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. McMillan and Reed (1994) described four other factors that appeared to be related to educational resiliency. They were personal attributes such as motivation and goal orientation, positive use of time, family life, and school and classroom learning environment. While educators cannot control factors such as community demographics and family conditions, they can change educational policies and practices to ensure that the specific needs of students at risk of academic failure are addressed (Comer, 1987).
The research showed that the transition from primary to secondary schools is a period of anxiety for many children (Galton, & Morrison, 2000; Jindal-Snape & Foggie, 2006) with substantial decline in self-esteem, academic motivation and achievement. However, school success has been promoted when the following developmental nutrients are supplied: (a) provide caring and supportive relationships in the school community, (b), increase student motivation and engagement, (c) increase the value that students attach to education (d) increase the effectiveness of students’ study habits, (e) strengthen social norms and expectations that promote achievement, and (f) increase parent involvement and student attendance (Starkman, Scales, & Roberts, 1999).

There have been numerous protective factors identified by researchers as significant in favorably impacting academic achievement for at risk students. They include family support (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Petit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997; Steinberg, 2001), relationships with non-family adults (Fletcher, Newsome, Nickerson, & Bazley, 2001; Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untch, & Widaman, 1997), caring school climate (Roeser, Midgely, & Urda, 1996), opportunities to feel useful, such as through service-learning (Araque, 2002; Billig, 2004), fairness of school discipline policies (Catterall, 1998), high expectations (Schmidt & Padilla, 2003), positive peer influence (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Mounts & Steinberg, 1995), participation in co-curricular and after-school programs (Barber & Eccles, 1997; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; NICHD, 2004), achievement motivation and school engagement (Jessor, VanDen Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Shiner, 2000), and social competencies (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Malecki & Elliot, 2002).
However, Fellner et al. (1997) concluded that attempts to change the school environment were less successful when each of the recommended supportive approaches was seen as a separate entity, and attempts were more successful when each initiative was interconnected in a comprehensive manner. Schools that have incorporated “resilience assets” such as caring relationships with and high expectations from teachers, parents, community adults, and peers, and meaningful opportunities to participate in schools and communities (such as through service-learning), have had successively higher standardized achievement test scores for at risk students.

School environments are an important factor in fostering resiliency. If the home and community are problematic, “exceptional youngsters may overcome the odds to be successful, but most will require the existence of a supportive and skillful group of educators if they are going to achieve academic and life success” (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p. 35). “More than any institution except the family, schools can provide the environment and conditions that foster resiliency in today’s youth and tomorrow’s adults” (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, p.2.). For example, Werner and Smith (1989) found that apart from the immediate family, a favorite teacher provided the most positive adult for resilient children. The teachers’ effects were more profound than just simple academic development (Zimmerman, 1994). Often, teachers have been unaware of the powerful effect they have on an individual student.

However, if they are otherwise at risk, if students come from strong, supportive home environments “resilience building in schools may be less of an issue” (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.34). The effectiveness of a comprehensive approach to school reform has been consistent with developmental theory and research that the most
significant positive youth outcomes are likely when individual and collective actions reinforce multiple support systems across multiple contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lerner, Wertlieb, & Jacobs, 2003). In conclusion, research identified a number of contributing factors that determine students’ successes and failures. However, the research has indicated that instructional practices and the classroom learning environment were significant contributing factors. (Travis, 1995; Waxman, 1992 Waxman & Huang, 1997).

**The resiliency wheel.** Henderson and Milstein (1996) identified six protective factors in their resiliency wheel. The resiliency wheel served as an outline for the process of building educational resilience and included the following factors: (a) increase prosocial bonding, (b) set clear, consistent boundaries, (c) teach life skills (those skills necessary for survival in the environment), (d) provide caring and support, (e) set and communicate high expectations, and (f) provide opportunities for meaningful participation.

Henderson and Milstein (1996) divided the resiliency wheel into two sections. The factors increase prosocial bonding, set clear, consistent boundaries and teach life skills mitigated risks for children. The three other factors were identified as necessary for building resiliency in children. Additionally, Henderson and Milstein created the Assessing School Resiliency Building tool for measuring the resiliency levels of students and teachers in schools.

Henderson and Milstein (2003) determined that schools have the opportunity to provide an environment that allows individual students to develop the capacity to overcome risks and build competencies indicative of resilience. They developed a six-
step strategy that identified factors instrumental in developing a resiliency-fostering school. These factors were aligned with the theory espoused in the resiliency model (Richardson et al., 1990), which described resiliency as the process of the interaction between individuals and the environment. The resiliency model (Figure 2.1) depicts the plausible outcomes when an individual (adult or child) is confronted with adversity and stressors.

Richardson et al., (1990), proposed that the resiliency model indicates that adversity does not automatically lead to dysfunction but can be manifested in a number of responses for the individual experiencing it and that even an initial dysfunctional response to adversity can, over time, improve. The levels of protective factors in place determined whether an individual’s reintegration into society would be a dysfunctional reintegration, reintegration with loss, reintegration to comfort zone (homeostasis) or reintegration with resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Biopsychospiritual protective factors were identified as being comprised of biological, psychological and spiritual factors that foster biological homeostasis, psychological homeostasis, and spiritual homeostasis (Richardson et al., 1990). Biological homeostasis described the physiological response that enables a person to cope with adversity such as when the body temperature is elevated and perspiration is initiated to promote cooling. Psychological homeostasis addressed the emotional response initiated when an individual is confronted with stressful events. Spiritual homeostasis was identified as occurring when an individual’s life is aligned with a value and or belief system (Richardson et al., 1990).

Richardson et al. (1990) defined reintegration as the process of reforming a world view by systematically problem solving and rebuilding. Resilient reintegration was described as the optimal level of adaptation because it cultivates the individual’s ability to learn new skills, foster self-efficacy, and appropriate social and problem solving skills. These appropriate traits were seen as being derived from envirosocial enhancing factors or processors such as parents and teachers who employ strategies to foster appropriate protective mechanism skills such as self-efficacy, responsible decision making, and
effective communication skills. Richardson et al. also identified envirosocial supportive factors such as the police, principal, or a parent who intervenes and provides support or intervention after an individual has experienced significant disruptions such as depression and alcoholism. Such an intervention or support was compared to a police officer incarcerating an individual who drives drunk or a principal sending a student to a juvenile detention facility after the student exhibits extreme inappropriate behaviors.

Homeostatic reintegration was defined as occurring when an individual is unchanged after experiencing a stressful event. Richardson et al. (1990) purported that an individual who returns to homeostasis did not learn and grow from the challenging experience and therefore will likely continue to experience similar challenges. Maladaptive reintegration and dysfunctional reintegration were terms used to represent adaptations counterproductive to successful human development.

The study of factors that foster resilience had significant and meaningful impacts in all aspects of an individual’s life because it acknowledged that individuals experience challenges and obstacles. However, resilience studies offered strategies and protective factors geared to negotiating life events and cultivation of social empowerment skills. Anthony (1987) suggested that research on the factors of resilience promote exceedingly more significant benefits to society than the prior view of prevention models designed to highlight traits of vulnerability.

**Chapter Summary**

There have been many studies that determined the protective factors that foster resilience for at-risk urban high school students. However, there has been limited research in identifying the risk factors as well as the protective factors that foster
resiliency for suburban at-risk high school minority students. In response to the gap in the literature, the qualitative study described in this dissertation identified the protective factors that facilitated resiliency in at-risk students in a suburban high school in New York State.

The qualitative research utilized grounded theory to answer the following research questions designed to explore why, despite adverse circumstances, some at-risk students succeed and many others are less successful.

1. What are at risk successful students’ perceptions of the level of resiliency in their suburban high school?

2. What are less successful at risk students’ perceptions of the level of resiliency in their suburban high school?

3. What protective factors foster educational resilience for at risk sixteen to eighteen year old minority students in a suburban high school?
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

The impact of disadvantageous conditions such as poverty, violence, family, and neighborhood have increased the likelihood that at-risk children enter school lacking the appropriate social skills, competencies, and emotional intelligence they need to achieve academic proficiency (Corrigan & Udas, 1996). Additionally, the ramification of these social conditions and hardships is challenging for educators in their attempts to close the achievement gap and prepare at-risk students for academic success.

Although data from suburban school districts illustrate that children of color in their schools outpace their racial peers in urban districts, the achievement gap between white and minority students in suburban districts is higher than the national data show (College Board, 1999). The purpose of the dissertation research was to gain greater insight and understanding regarding how 16 to 18-year-old at-risk students in a suburban high school perceived the levels of support that foster educational resilience.

This qualitative study was designed to gain greater understanding of the process of developing educational resilience in at-risk students. The definitive purpose of utilizing a qualitative research design was to acquire an insightful understanding of the at-risk students’ perception of the levels of factors supporting resilience in their educational environment. Grounded theory was used to analyze, interpret, and understand the data, and assist in the formation of a theory based upon the information obtained from the study’s participants.
Research Questions

This research examined the perceptions of the at-risk students regarding the presence of resiliency wheel aligned protective factors in their suburban school. The following research questions guided this qualitative research:

1. What are successful at risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?
2. What are less successful at risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?
3. What protective factors foster educational resilience for at risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school?

Research Context

Participants in the dissertation study included 16 through 18-year-old students from a high school in a suburban community located in upstate New York, referred to as Hudson River High School (pseudonym). Because numerous studies identified poverty as a risk factor for children (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Bennett, Elliott, & Peters, 2005; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Kim-Cohen, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2004), Hudson River High School was chosen because of its high percentage of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, as determined by free and reduced lunch eligibility. The school served students in grades 9 through 12.

Hudson River High School had a population of approximately 1,200 students and was located in a school district that served over 8,000 children. The district was considered vibrant and economically, racially, and culturally diverse. During the 1980s and 1990s, the school district was considered one of the best in the state; however,
changing demographics has shifted the status of the school. The status of the schools is consistent with Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) claim that historically many schools achieved their academic goals because they encompassed mainly students who were motivated and eager to learn and had support systems in place at home and in their communities. However, the student population has changed drastically from previous years, and students are now diverse in their socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities and contain more students who are considered at-risk. Furthermore, schools are held accountable for academic success for all of their students.

The 2011-2012 New York State report card demonstrated that the high school was not adequately serving students in multiple demographic subgroups, particularly African American and Hispanic students, along with ESL students, economically disadvantaged students, and special education students. Table 3.1 displays the demographics of the school district and school.

**Research Participants**

Two groups of at-risk 16 to 18 year old students were selected from Hudson River High School located in the Hudson Valley in New York State. The cumulative grade averages of students’ completed classes as indicated on their transcripts facilitated the criteria for student selection. The first group of students included 10 students with grade point averages of 68% and below, and the other group was comprised of 10 students with grade point averages of 85% and above. Hudson River High School has the technological capability to generate computer reports that identify students with grade point averages of 68% and below as well as those with grade point averages of 85% and above. The students were randomly selected from those computer-generated reports, and parental
consent forms were sent home for selected students who were under the age of 18 after selection. All 20 selected students took the paper survey. From these 20 students, 5 from each group were randomly selected to participate in the interviews.

Table 3.1

Student Demographics: Hudson River School District and Hudson River High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Element</th>
<th>% of Students Hudson River School District</th>
<th>% of Students Hudson River High School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>50% (30% Haitian)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Native American</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Lunch and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>78% (67% Free/11% Reduced)</td>
<td>67% (55% Free/12% Reduced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The New York State Department of Education uses free and reduced lunch as an indicator of economic hardship.
The dissertation research utilized the criteria for at-risk as defined by Chen and Kaufman (1997). Students were considered at-risk if they had one or more of the following characteristics:

- Lowest socioeconomic quartile;
- Single parent family;
- Older sibling dropped out of school;
- Changed schools two or more times;
- Average grades of C’s or lower from sixth to eighth grade; and
- Repeated a grade.

Data from the 2011-2012 New York State Report Card showed that all students in the school did not attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Additionally the school did not meet New York State’s criterion for the four-year graduation rate.

**Instruments for Data Collection**

Patterson and Patterson (2004) identified the importance of teachers and school leaders in cultivating an environment with interconnected protective factors that foster resilience. Bronfenbrenner (1979) espoused the conception of an ecological environment in which the relationship between the child and the school is the determining factor in the child’s development. Bandura (1977) stated that self-efficacy is developed when a child masters new experiences.

For the purpose of the dissertation study, two types of data collection methods were used. The process included a paper survey and interviews. Using two methods for collecting data limited the possibility of losing or omitting valuable information and
allowed for triangulation. In qualitative research, triangulation establishes verity in the data provided by the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, the use of these two methods of data collection increased the validity of the process, aided in developing new themes, and facilitated the eventual emergence of the theory.

The Assessing School Resiliency Building questionnaire, a Likert scale instrument aligned with the six factors on the resiliency wheel (Figure 3.1), was used to assess the students’ perceptions of the current state of the school culture and its ability to promote resiliency at Hudson River High School. Questions focused on the six divisions of Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) resiliency wheel: prosocial bonding, clear and consistent boundaries, teaching life skills, caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

![Figure 3.1. The resiliency wheel. Adapted from Resiliency in Schools: Making it happen for students and educators, by N. Henderson and M. Milstein, 2003. Copyright 2003 by Corwin Press.](image-url)
Each of the six sections of the questionnaire was comprised of three questions, and each of the questions was rated on a scale from 1 to 4 with 1 indicating “this is always true,” 2 indicating “this is sometimes true,” 3 indicating “this is rarely true,” and 4 indicating “this is never true.” The total scores ranged from 18 to 72 points with the lower scores indicating positive resilience building factors and the higher scores indicating a need for improvement. Henderson (1996, 2003) did not evaluate the survey for reliability and validity; however, numerous researchers have used the survey. The phraseology of the questionnaire was modified to ensure comprehension by the 16 to 18-year-old participants.

Research has interrogated the positionalities of researchers and their subjects and the consequent power relationships that develop between them, with the focus on situations where the researcher is in a more powerful position than the participant (Lal, 1996; Patai, 1991; Sidaway, 1992). Thus, because the researcher was an administrator in the school, two outsiders who were not perceived as being in positions of power by students, conducted the interviews. Both interviewers were security aides from a different facility. The two outsiders, who administered the questionnaires and the interviews, went through 3 two-hour training sessions to learn the protocol for the administration of the questionnaires and the interviews. The interviews were guided by the specific six areas on the resiliency wheel but additional information was gathered through the use of prompts that enabled the participants to share additional information. Additionally, as the interview progressed, the interviewers requested clarifying details to obtain accurate information and to learn more about the participant’s experiences and reflections. (Charmaz, 2006).
Intensive interviewing, a useful tool for data gathering was applied for this research because it permitted an in-depth conversation in a particular topic or experience and, was a useful method for interpretive inquiry (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, intensive interviewing has been regarded as a suitable complement for grounded theory because both are open-ended, yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted. (Charmaz, 2006). Intensive interviewing was significant because it elicited each participant’s perception and interpretation of his or her experience (Seidman, 1997).

Following the questionnaire, 5 of the 20 participants participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews. Each question of the interview was aligned with each of the six protective factors of Henderson and Milstein’s (1996, 2003) resiliency wheel. Data was collected over a 10 day period for one hour sessions each day. The two interviewers simultaneously conducted the surveys and interviews in two neighboring conference rooms between 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., which was after school dismissal.

During data collection, the researcher was responsible for addressing all areas of ethical concern and ensuring measures were in place to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Schaw, and Smith. (2006) indicated that one of the researcher’s main concerns is protecting the participants’ privacy rights. To satisfy this requirement, the researcher explained the participants’ rights to them and provided them with a prepared confidentiality form. Once the participant’s parent/guardian signed the informed confidentiality form, the researcher assigned a code that was used throughout the study to identify the participant. This practice ensured the identity of the participant was not revealed.
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research entails studying social phenomena (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), and there are a variation of methods that can be employed to accomplish this task including case studies, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry/biography, and hermeneutics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The qualitative method used in the dissertation research was grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is a form of qualitative research in which the researcher’s role is to “generate or discover a theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of the research participants” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.11).

Grounded theory provided an approach for a broad expression of experiences and perspectives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The rationale for using a grounded theory approach in this study was to gain insight for the development of a theory on the process of educational resilience, specifically related to at-risk 16 to 18-year-old students in a suburban high school. The grounded theory methodology challenged the researcher to set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge. (Creswell, 2005).

The goal of the dissertation study was to understand the process of developing resilience in at-risk students to create a theory regarding resilience. The definitive purpose of utilizing a qualitative research method was to collect and describe data from the perspectives of the participants in order to develop a grounded theory of the elements involved in fostering educational resilience among at-risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students. Grounded theory was used to help analyze, interpret, and understand the data.
and assist in the formation of a theory based on the information obtained from the participants.

Responses of participants during interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were compared with the audiotapes to evaluate the accuracy of the initial transcriptions.

Data analysis was guided by the three phases espoused by Charmaz (2006): (a) initial coding, (b) focused coding, and (c) theoretical coding. These three different types of sequential coding assisted in analyzing data collected for the purpose of developing a contextual theory.

Initial coding involved segmenting the data into labeled categories in order to frame analytical themes that fostered and initiated the grounded theory. The process of cultivating the grounded theory required the researcher to be objective and to be willing to discover rising theoretical possibilities. This involved seeing actions and nuances in each segment of data rather than applying preexisting categories to the data (Charmaz, 2006). The initial coding process involved segmenting and labeling the data line-by-line. Line-by-line coding fostered greater insight into the data. Charmaz (2006) indicated that, “engaging in line-by-line coding helps the researcher to identify implicit concerns and explicit statements.”

The second phase involved focused coding, which was more directed, selected, and conceptual than the initial coding (Glaser, 1978). Focused coding supported the emergence of themes as events, perspectives, and actions materialized as significant. The developed categories from the initial coding phase facilitated the focused coding process
because the initial themes and categories provided the lens for analyzing the data in a comprehensive and incisive manner. (Charmaz, 2006).

The final step was theoretical coding, that conceptualized “how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p.78). Theoretical codes were integrative and gave form to the focused codes previously collected by highlighting possible relationships between the previously created categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Since biases can influence scientific investigations and distort the measurement process, the researcher acknowledged known biases. In order to minimize investigator bias, Patton (2002) suggested a “rigorous and systematic data collection procedures, for example, cross-checking and cross-validating sources during fieldwork” (p. 545). These steps minimized bias and limited misinterpretation and misuse of data in the grounded theory study.

Chapter Summary

The goal of the dissertation study was to provide valuable and relevant data that could influence how schools provide support for at-risk student populations. The qualitative grounded theory methodology provided insight and awareness from the perceptions of the at-risk students regarding the protective factors that foster educational resilience.

This research was intended to inform educational institutions about that decreased academic achievement for at-risk students. The identification of these factors can help schools design more effective educational interventions for at-risk students.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the qualitative research described in this dissertation was to gain greater understanding of the process of developing educational resilience in at-risk students. The definitive purpose of utilizing a qualitative research design was to acquire an insightful understanding of the at-risk students’ perception of the levels of factors supporting resilience in their educational environment. Qualitative data were collected through a paper survey and interviews.

Two groups of 10 participants each were selected to complete the Assessing School Resiliency survey and two groups of 5 participants from each group were randomly selected to participate in the audiotaped interviews. The first group was comprised of 10 16- to 18-year-old students with grade point averages of 68% and below, and the other group was comprised of 10 students with grade point averages of 85% and above. The participants were students from Hudson River High School located in the Hudson Valley in New York State. The letters “X” and “Q” identified the two groups of participants: students whose grade point averages were 68% and below were identified by the letter X followed by a number; students whose grade point averages were 85% and above were identified by the letter Q and a number.

The 10 audiotaped interviews were transcribed and analyzed using methods consistent with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The methodical coding of the interviews identified underlying themes and explicit connections between categories and subcategories. Understanding the relationship between each of the categories provided
insight into the students’ perceptions of the level of resiliency in their suburban high school. The dissertation study provided awareness to educators about the significance of at-risk students’ perceptions of the dynamics of a school environment that foster educational resilience.

**Research Questions**

Chapter 4 focuses on the responses of the participants to the survey and the interview questions. Responses provided data to answer the following research questions:

1. What are successful at-risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resilience in their suburban high school?

2. What are less successful at-risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resilience in their suburban high school?

3. What protective factors foster educational resilience for at-risk sixteen to eighteen year old students in a suburban high school?

In the dissertation study, the factors that fostered resiliency were framed by Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) resiliency wheel, which identified six environmental protective factors that cultivate individual’s capacity to bounce back from adversity, and adapt to pressures and challenges encountered. The resiliency wheel divided the protective factors into two categories: mitigating risk factors in the environment and building resiliency factors in the environment.

The mitigating risk protective environmental factors are (a) increase prosocial bonding, (b) set clear, consistent boundaries, and (c) teach life skills. These mitigating factors were identified as being crucial support systems that significantly and positively impact an at-risk student’s ability to meet educational expectations. Henderson and
Milstein (2003) indicated that increased prosocial bonding positively affected academic achievement because it provides stimulating connections and engaging opportunities through a network of clubs and organizations for students to participate. Such participation fostered a strong sense of purpose and community. Henderson and Milstein regarded setting clear and consistent boundaries as a powerful resiliency building factor because it increases the sense of safety in the environment by providing and enforcing rules and policies. Teaching effective life skills such as conflict resolution and communication skills were pertinent to preparing students for new experiences or changes they may encounter (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Henderson and Milstein indicated that developing life skills was an effective tool that fostered successful coping strategies for new and unexpected life challenges.

The other half of the resiliency wheel (Henderson & Milstein, 2003) was comprised of factors that build resiliency in the environment: (a) provide care and support, (b) set and communicate high expectations, and (c) provide opportunities for meaningful participation. Henderson and Milstein (2003) described “provide care and support” as the most powerful external support for at-risk students because it emphasizes unconditional positive regard and encouragement. They also cited “set and communicate high expectations” as extremely important for at-risk students because it involves recognizing positive changes and small steps of progress. Henderson and Milstein suggested that the strong sense of purpose that “providing opportunities for meaningful participation” nurtures is instrumental to rebounding from adversities. They noted, “one of the best ways to bounce back from personal problems is to help someone else with theirs” (Henderson & Milstein, 2003, p. 11).
The qualitative study was designed to discover the students’ viewpoints and perceptions about practices in their school, which may or may not be aligned with factors that foster resiliency. Data from the surveys were analyzed by the resiliency wheel’s six categories, and comparative analyses were conducted within each group of categories. The Likert survey was comprised of three questions in each of the six categories. Participants had to evaluate the statements on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 indicating “This is always true,” 2 indicating “This is sometimes true,” 3 indicating “This is rarely true,” and 4 indicating “This is never true.” Students were asked to circle the number that represented their answer to the statements.

The first page of the survey consisted of the participants’ perceptions of the three mitigating risk protective environmental factors stipulated on the resiliency wheel: prosocial bonding, clear consistent boundaries, and teaching life skills. The second page contained the building resiliency factors in the environment: caring and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

The findings of the dissertation research were organized and aligned in the order of the research questions within the context of the six factors of the resiliency wheel. This section illustrates the participants’ responses to the survey and contains significant quotes from the interviews. Participants’ responses to the survey are first depicted in the line graphs followed by significant quotes, which are documented in tables.

The first set of findings were indicative of the perceptions of the higher performing at risk students—the Q participants—and the second set of results were the perceptions of the lower performing at-risk students—the X participants.
**Research question 1.** What are successful at risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?

**Prosocial bonding.** This protective factor exemplified the importance of the connections between students and at least one of the many caring adults in the school as well as students’ involvements with before, after, or in school activities.

*Figure 4.1.* Student perceptions of prosocial bonding. Survey question PSB1: I have a positive connection with at least one caring adult in my school. PSB2: I participate in after school activities. PSB3: I trust at least one adult in my school.

Figure 4.1 shows the student responses to the survey questions that focused on prosocial bonding. Eighty percent of the ‘Q’ participants rated the statement ‘I have a positive connection with at least one caring adult in my school’ with the number ‘1’. However, 20% indicated that they sometimes participate in after school activities and 30% indicated that they rarely participate in after school activities.

During the interviews, the participants shared their perceptions on connections with adults in the school.
Table 4.1

*Participant Quotes on Connections with Adults in the School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>For the most part, all my relationships with my teachers are pretty good. I would say that the only ones that weren’t good was because of me. Freshman year I had a lot of rifts with teachers only because of things I was going through. Some teachers don’t respond well to you not doing their work. They don’t like you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>I always try to be as good as I can. I want the teacher to be proud of me and not yelling at me. And that works for me – not being bad or fighting all the time. I learn that by doing that I pass the class. The ones who are always talking don’t learn anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>Well there are some kids who have issues with their teachers probably because they are not used to their work ethics. And they don’t try to work out the situation. Others probably have issues in school but don’t really tell the teachers. They just go with the class structure. I mean, it’s like they don’t really care. They are just there in the classroom listening to what the teacher says but they don’t really understand how the teacher says something. I understand where they’re coming from. There are some teachers that have different work ethics that I’m also not used to. But I still try to work it out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>My relationship with my teachers is very close. I would say because from the beginning of the year, I make my presence known to them. I introduce myself and try to get myself connected to them. By the middle of the year if I miss an assignment, they are very understanding. If I need to do a make-up, they provide me with extra assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ comments illustrated their awareness of their behaviors as determining the nature of their connections with their teachers. The term reflective reciprocity described this mirrored exchange of responses between the teachers and students. The ‘Q’ participants expressed their consciousness of this and thereby worked to mitigate negative responses from their teachers.
The incorporation of before and after school activities into the school culture has been found to be extremely significant in fostering resilience in at-risk students (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Table 4.2 contains quotes from participants who expressed their frustrations regarding the lack of meaningful activities and resources in the school due to significant budgetary constraints.

Table 4.2

*Participant Quotes on Lack of Meaningful Activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>There was one class that I took for career club which was good. This class has been cut. It was a money management program through Cornell and they would come after school. It was a 8 week program. They spoke about money and how to build your credit. So that was the only class that pertained to real life that I’ve taken besides Economics. They talked about college dorming and how to save and spend money when being in college. I felt that it was another resource that they took away from the kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>We have students that have the potential to succeed, but we need to figure out how to create more opportunity for kids and for those who don’t necessarily have the same drive as AP and honors students. I feel like a lot of opportunity has been taken from them too. They may not take it but it still should be there in case they may want to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>I feel like with the opportunities that were available to me, I took that and learned what I could. But I also feel that I was denied things that other schools may have. But overall I think I’ve done pretty good. But I’ve noticed that since freshman year to now, there is not as many things to do in the school. So that restricts what I can put on my resume. But with what has been handed to me, I feel like I’ve done well. I’ve done a lot of things after school community wise, so I’m proud of myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>But there probably should be events that encourage kids to continue doing their work. Maybe in classrooms there could be different ways of teaching, to engage the students so they are not always bored in class and always drawing on their notebook. Maybe some events that raise their involvement in the school I guess.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In their quotes, the ‘Q’ participants demonstrated that there was a lack of engagement and real world connections in their school culture.

**Clear, consistent boundaries.** Schools that cultivate resiliency foster a culture of safety and consistency by setting and enforcing clear and consistent policies (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Henderson and Milstein (2003) suggested, “anything that increases the feeling of inner security makes it easier to bounce back.” Table 4.2 shows the student perceptions of clear, consistent boundaries.

![Figure 4.2](image.png)

*Figure 4.2. Q student perceptions of clear, consistent boundaries. Survey question CCB1: I understand the rules and regulations of the school. CCB2: I am aware of the consequences for inappropriate behaviors. CCB3: I know whom to go to in my school when I have a conflict with another student.*

Figure 4.2 demonstrates the responses from the ‘Q’ students to the surveys that showed that 60% of the students indicated that they always understand the rules, regulations, and decision-making process of the school and are aware of consequences for inappropriate behaviors. Sixty percent evaluated the statement, “I know whom to go to in my school when I have a conflict with another student” as always true. However,
during the interviews, some participants expressed their lack of comprehension of the viability of the rules as well as the school’s responses to students’ misbehaviors. Table 4.3 includes quotes from participants about school rules.

Table 4.3

*Participant Quotes on School Rules*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>They try to control us too much. I don’t understand how wearing a hat will affect my grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>There’s consequences for everything. It used to be “Well he hit me first” but now everyone down to the kid who instigated the whole thing will be in trouble. It’s like a wakeup call. So let’s stop messing around.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>By seeing the things that other students go through by fighting every day and getting suspended, I learn from them. I try to not pay attention or ignore people who may want to try and fight you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>I guess rules are made when teachers and security observe something that gets out of control and will try to regulate it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>When you come to school in the morning, they are always telling you to take your headphones, hats, jackets and stuff like that off because they are helping you. What if they didn’t do that and someone brought something to school that there weren’t supposed to? Something like that can happen and everyone would be in trouble. So I think that is good. They help me feel safe by doing that but sometimes people don’t listen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants’ quotes indicated their lack of participation in the decision-making process as well as their lack of understanding and involvement in the establishment of rules and regulations governing the school environment. The participants had, however, learned to accept and follow the rules.
**Teaching life skills.** Henderson and Milstein (2003) regarded “teaching life skills” as a significant factor in cultivating and reinforcing resiliency in at-risk students because it provides them with the tools and skills needed to navigate challenging experiences or crisis. Skills such as conflict resolution, communication and stress management are pertinent for creating a learning environment that is conducive to academic achievement (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Figure 4.3 shows the student perceptions of teaching life skills.

*Figure 4.3.* Q student perceptions of teaching life skills. Survey question TLS1: I deal with conflicts in a responsible manner. TLS2: I learn in school how to make responsible life decisions. TLS3: My school prepares me for life beyond high school.

Forty percent of the ‘Q’ participants evaluated the statement, “My school prepares me for life beyond high school” as rarely true. Additionally 60% rated the statement, “I deal with conflicts in a responsible manner” as always and sometimes true. During the interviews, the participants expressed their opinions on how conflicts were resolved in the school. Representative responses are shown in Table 4.4.
### Table 4.4

**Participant Quotes on How Conflicts are Resolved**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>Like if I have a conflict with someone, I’m going to confront them and see how it goes from there. Because I don’t like people messing with me. That’s my way of dealing with things. I know there’s other ways. Go to a teacher or security but I don’t believe in that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>I don’t ever get into conflict with anyone in school. I don’t have conflict with anybody. But if there was conflict, I would go to the security desk for assistance and ask the principal for help I’m a good student. I get A’s and B’s. I’ve never been a person who goes into conflict. I hate conflict and go away from it. My background. The way my parents raised me. They’ve always taught me that if someone is having problems with me, to not fight but to talk it out. I would never fight someone unless I’m really provoked but that never happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>By seeing the things that other students go through by fighting every day and getting suspended, I learn from them. I try to not pay attention or ignore people who may want to try and fight me. It feels like I’m mature enough to know how to control myself. Self-control. I’m not like the others who will just fight for nothing. I tried to control myself and move away from the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>Personally I do not have too many conflicts myself, but some of my friends do. And basically what I tell them to do is walk away. At the end of the day, you don’t have time for immaturity or anything that is not going to push you towards what you’re trying to do in life. So just avoid it. After high school if over, you will never have to see these people again in your life if you don’t want to, so why make those 4 years harder?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ quotes demonstrate their awareness that the school’s culture was often plagued with many students’ conflicts. They were however, aware of the consequences for fighting. Their statements indicated they recognized the importance of practicing self-control and seeking assistance from an adult when confronted with conflict. However,
Participant Q3 expressed the struggle between practicing self-control and reacting impulsively.

**Caring and support.** Benard (2004) suggested that schools are responsible for focusing on more than just student academic performance. She postulated that the role of the school in students’ lives is significantly broader than pedagogy and much more important than test scores. Caring relationships with teachers in the schools are paramount to fostering resiliency for at risk students (Benard, 2004). Research demonstrated that caring teachers show unconditional acceptance and are relentless in their efforts to ensure that their students succeed. Figure 4.4 shows student responses to survey questions about caring and support.

![Survey chart](chart.png)

**Figure 4.4.** Q student perceptions of caring and support. Survey question CAS1: I feel cared for and supported in my school. CAS2: I am rewarded in school for doing the right things. CAS3: Most people in my school are kind and supportive.

The ‘Q’ participants responded favorably to the statement, “Most people in my school are kind and supportive,” and 80% them evaluated the statement as always or...
sometimes true. However, 50% rated the statement, “I feel cared for and supported in my school” as rarely or never true, and 50% of the participants indicated that most people in their school are sometimes kind and supportive. During the interviews, the participants expressed the importance of fostering a good relationship with their teachers, and they described the correlation between good behavior and positive relationship with their teachers. Quotes from participants are shown in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5**

*Participant Quotes on the School’s Ability to Provide Support and Care.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>Some teachers don’t respond well to you not doing their work. They don’t like you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>I feel connected to Ms. P. I tell her a lot about my life and she gives me advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>My relationship with my teachers is very close I would say because from the beginning of the year, I make my presence known to them. I introduce myself and try to get myself connected to them. By the middle of the year if I miss an assignment, they are very understanding. If I need to do a make-up, they provide me with extra assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>I think I have a good relationship with my teachers. I do everything I need to do to pass the classes they put me in. I don’t say “this is not my thing”. I try everything, even if I cannot keep up. I try everything to pass the class and move on to the next class. I don’t always talk or do bad things. I always try to be as good as I can. I want the teacher to be proud of me and not yelling at me. And that works for me – not being bad or fighting all the time. I learn more by doing that and pass the class. The ones who are always talking don’t learn anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>The relationships with all of my teachers are fair.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants expressed their awareness of the correlation between good behaviors in class and positive relationships with their teachers.
**High expectations.** Benard (1993) expressed the importance of setting realistic and high expectations for students by implementing higher-order, meaningful, and participatory instruction that addresses students’ multiple intelligences and learning styles. Figure 4.5 shows how students responded to questions about high expectations.

![Figure 4.5](image)

**Figure 4.5.** Q student perceptions of high expectations. Survey question HE1: I believe that I will be successful in school. HE2: My teachers believe that I can succeed. HE3: Students and teachers have a positive attitude.

Figure 4.5 illustrates that 80% of the participations rated the statement, “I believe that I will be successful in school” to be always true, and 90% regarded the statement, “Students and teachers have a positive attitude” to be always or sometimes true. Additionally, 80% stated that it was always true that their teachers believe they can succeed.

During the interviews the students expressed their concerns about the quality of instruction provided to them and teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards academic achievement. Quotes from the students are shown in Table 4.6.
### Table 4.6

**Participant Quotes on Academic Achievement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>I don’t understand why we learn half the things. Like how a cell divides. I don’t know how that’s going to help me but if it’s part of the curriculum, then I guess I still have to learn it. Like stuff in Chemistry. I don’t know what I’m going to need that for. It’s like the least important things. I think learning a second language would be important but they don’t stress that. If we learned a second language it would probably help to get a job. Not understanding random things like Chemistry and Physics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>But I feel like it could have more school spirit and could be more excited about school. I don’t know – the tone is blah, especially with the cuts and stuff. What I mean by tone is that there’s nothing engaging or entertaining I guess. Seems like every day is the same thing. But there probably should be events that encourage kids to continue doing their work. Maybe in classrooms there could be different ways of teaching, to engage the students so they are not always bored in class and always drawing on their notebook. Maybe some events that raise their involvement in the school I guess. Well there are some kids who have issues with their teachers probably because they are not used to their work ethics. They are just there in the classroom listening to what the teacher says but they don’t really understand how the teacher says something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>Some students will fail the regents and only want to get a 65 to just pass, instead of aiming for an 80 or something to redeem themselves. They don’t think about doing better – just about passing and get it over with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>They give you the work you need to do and if you don’t do it, it’s your fault.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>I think others see that I’m a nice kid. That I have a good personality and good character. I’m usually a good person with my relationships. I follow the rules every day. I’m always nice to my teachers and don’t try to start anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>I’m always positive minded. Most of the time I’m positive and determined to get good grades for my future.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ quotes illustrated their self-motivating qualities that were propelling them to academic success even though they were aware that they may not be receiving quality and meaningful instruction.
Opportunities for meaningful participation. This protective factor incorporates the delegation of responsibilities to students in the decision-making and goal-setting processes in the school environment. Opportunities for meaningful participation as a protective factor is significant because it perceives students as resources rather than passive objects or problems. (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Figure 4.6 shows how the students responded to questions regarding opportunities for meaningful participation.

![Figure 4.6](Q student perceptions of opportunities for meaningful participation. Survey question OMP1: I am involved in extracurricular activities that help other students, school, and the community. OMP2: I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities. OMP3: Students, teachers and parents work together all the time.

Figure 4.6 indicates that 60% of the participants evaluated the statement, “I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities” to be rarely or never true. Additionally, 60% of this group evaluated the statement, “Students, teachers and parents work together all the time” as rarely or never true. Only 30% of the
Q participants indicated that they were always or sometimes involved in extracurricular activities that help other students, school, and the community.

The Q participants expressed their perceptions on their involvement in the school’s decision making process and other opportunities for meaningful participation in the interviews. Quotes from participants are shown in Table 4.7.

The quotes indicated the students’ yearn for meaningful participation in the school, but have been denied the opportunity. They expressed their comprehension of the impact of the budgetary constraints on school resources and its bearing on their futures.

**Research question 2.** What are less successful at risk students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school?

**Prosocial bonding.** Henderson and Milstein (2003) postulated that students who were bonded or connected to other people through clubs or after school organizations and were engaged in meaningful activities were able to successfully cope with adversities. Figure 4.7 illustrates that 70% of the participants rated the statement “I have a positive connection with at least one caring adult in my school” with “1” which indicated that this is always true. The same 70% of the participants also evaluated the statement, “I trust at least one adult in my school” with a “1”. Additionally 50% of the X participants responded to the statement “I participate in after school activities” as rarely or never true. Table 4.8 contains quotes from students who were less successful at school.
Table 4.7

*Q Participant Quotes on School Decision Making and Other Meaningful participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>We have students that have the potential to succeed, but we need to figure out how to create more opportunity for kids and for those who don’t necessarily have the same drive as AP and honors students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>I feel like decisions are made not based on how it will affect students. It’s just based on money, money, money. I think that whoever is making decisions need to focus more on what will help the students rather than how they can meet the budget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>I think the decisions are made in the school do not really include the students as much as they would want to. They usually just consult themselves or the teachers on what they think is best for the school. But they should listen to the students some of the time and their opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>Decisions made in the school – some of them are positive and some of them are negative effects to the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>Not saying that money doesn’t matter but it’s like if you take so much away from the school, it deprives the tone, the culture and is overall negative. So I think that the decisions should take more students into consideration. It makes me feel like those making decisions don’t care about the students. So it makes me feel not important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>I feel like with the opportunities that were available to me, I took that and learned what I could. But I also feel that I was denied things that other schools may have. But overall I think I’ve done pretty good. But I’ve noticed that since freshman year to now, there is not as many things to do in the school. So that restricts what I can put on my resume. But with what has been handed to me, I feel like I’ve done well. I’ve done a lot of things after school community wise, so I’m proud of myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>The school’s decisions are based on the welfare of the students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.7. X Students’ perceptions of prosocial bonding. Survey question PSB1: I have a positive connection with at least one caring adult in my school. PSB2: I participate in after school activities. PSB3: I trust at least one adult in my school.

Quotes from the participants demonstrate their mindfulness of the ramifications associated with negative interactions with their teachers and their need to “stay in their place” so as to not jeopardize their chances of passing classes.

**Clear, consistent boundaries.** Henderson and Milstein (2003) suggest that schools should implement school wide policies in a clear and consistent manner and also should involve students in the establishment of behavior policies and enforcement procedures. This process of inclusivity fosters a culture of caring rather than of punishment.

Figure 4.8 indicates that 100% of the students evaluated as always or sometimes true the statement, “I understand the rules and regulations of the school”. Additionally 90% of the X students indicated as “always or sometimes” their awareness of the consequences for inappropriate behaviors.
### Table 4.8

**X Participant Quotes on Prosocial Bonding**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>If the teachers don’t respect me then I really don’t have high respect for them. Therefore, that’s when there’s conflict and all of this happens. Then the principal gets involved, then my parents and then teachers are complaining. There are a couple of teachers that I can go for anything, or if I need help. I have to put up with them for the whole year so I just not really bother them and do my work. So then they can’t hold anything against me, like “I’m gonna fail him because he hasn’t done his work”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>My teachers like me so pretty good I guess. I’m kind and polite. I’m not a jerk either. They love having me in class. I’ve only gotten kicked out of class once. I know my place in class and don’t get out of line. I’m respectful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>Some of my teachers care, but some don't. They just teach-like if you don't get it, you don't get it. Some of the teachers I think just don’t like me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>I have a great relationship with all of my teachers. Personally I don’t like some of them just because sometimes they can be a little rude with their tone of voice. They aren’t fully to blame because I could be putting them up to it by maybe not doing my work or paying attention or talking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the interviews, the students were expressive about their perceptions on the school’s ability to set clear and consistent boundaries and on its decision-making process. Table 4.9 contains quotes from students about clear and consistent boundaries.
Figure 4.8. X student perceptions of clear, consistent boundaries. Survey question CCB1: I understand the rules and regulations of the school. CCB2: I am aware of the consequences for inappropriate behaviors. CCB3: I know whom to go to in my school when I have a conflict with another student.

The participants’ quotes reflected the lack of structure and relevance of the decision-making process in the school as well as their lack of involvement in the decision-making process. Their expressions also demonstrated the punitive nature of the administrator’s responses to students’ misbehaviors.

**Teaching life skills.** These protective factors facilitate the cultivation of healthy conflict resolution, communication, problem solving skills, and responsible decision making.

Figure 4.9 illustrates that 50% of the X participants indicated that they sometimes deal with conflicts in a responsible manner, and 40% evaluated the statement, “My school prepares me for life beyond high school” as rarely or never true. Additionally, 40% of the participants rated the statement, “I learn in school how to make responsible
life decisions” as rarely or never true with 40% evaluating the same statement to be sometimes true.

Table 4.9

*Participant Quotes on Clear and Consistent Boundaries*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>Well I don’t know why we can’t wear hats. But the dress code I understand because some girls come to school half naked and that’s not cute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X19</td>
<td>Everyone makes their own decisions. Students individually make their own decisions and teachers make their own. But as a whole, the school will decide what should be taught, what programs should stay and what should be after school. I feel these decisions are sometimes rushed just for the moment because there are budget cuts so they are rushed because there’s no money and they don’t even try to save it or bring something else back. I guess it depends on if there’s going to be a vote through the town and the community can decide what can stay and what can’t. It depends on who actually votes. That depends on the higher ups. I don’t know if the teachers vote on that or if it depends on who’s in charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>I think the decisions are fair for suspensions. Like if someone gets into a fight it’s not like they get to come back to school the next day. The teacher and principal with suspensions and their choices in all that other stuff are pretty good decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>They are basically made on what the needs are for the school. If the senior class wants to go on a trip, we would have to ask for that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.10 shows responses from the X participants of their perceptions on their ability to resolve conflicts and their school’s ability to provide them with skills that prepare them for life beyond high school.
Figure 4.9. X student perceptions of teaching life skills. Survey question TLS1: I deal with conflicts in a responsible manner. TLS2: I learn in school how to make responsible life decisions. TLS3: My school prepares me for life beyond high school.

The quotes disclosed the participants’ emotional and impulsive responses to conflicts as well as school personnel’s inappropriate reactions to student conflicts. Participants’ quotes reflected the lack of guidance related to life skills including conflict resolution.

Caring and support. Students need to trust that their teachers will know them as individuals and will know their individual talents and learning styles (Thomsen, 2002). Henderson and Milstein (2003) argued that caring and support is the most critical protective factor for cultivating resiliency because it provides unconditional positive regard and encouragement for at risk students.
### Table 4.10

**X Participant Quotes on Conflict Resolution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>When I’m mad? I don’t know... I can’t control myself. I take things into my own hands. Conflict! But I don’t start it – they start it. I just finish. I feel like I try to stay out of trouble so much, oh my God. And then, it’s just a struggle. Somebody always wants to start something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>He didn’t do anything at all [describing involvement in fight observed by a security aide]. I got into a conflict and basically took off my jacket and he watched! He watched. He watched the fight. I didn’t want to fight either and he just watched. He just watched – like clearly watched and didn’t do anything. Then he went and told Mr. K and he came to actually tried to do something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>If there’s a fight then everyone’s gonna be talking about it. If no police come it will just be a normal tone. Otherwise everyone will be talking about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>Self-defense. I’m not just gonna sit there and not fight back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X16</td>
<td>I try to avoid conflict as much as I possibly can. I try to talk it out. It is for self-defense. As much as I preach about “I’m going to fight this girl” I’m really not going to fight her unless she strikes me first. But I tell some people sometimes that I don’t want to fight them because I want to avoid conflict. I tell some people “listen, I need to talk to this girl”. I don’t want her to feel like I’m ganging up on her. I just want to see what is her deal. Maybe I would talk to some teachers if I can’t handle it anymore and feel like it’s going to escalate. Or I might tell a security guard or another teacher. Never a guidance counselor cause some of them are not good. I don’t get into fights until it escalates into something more. It’s like basically the only time I get into fights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X19</td>
<td>Try to take myself out of the situation and avoid it as much as I can. If someone is bothering me or trying to bully me, I try to not let the words affect me and blank them out. But if it continues on, I will get up and leave and try to remove myself from the situation. Getting into a fight or bullying someone or being down right mean to someone. Like if they are smaller than you or something. That is conflict that would get you kicked out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>We’ll argue for a little bit but after a while you need to stop because you’ll either end up in a fight or disrupting a class. One doesn’t agree with the other one or they’re fighting and trying to look tough in front of their friends and then they end up fighting and getting suspended. Unnecessary reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X19</td>
<td>Life skills are not so much being taught by the teachers, but just by being in school and being in the environment with other kids. You as a student will learn that this person is going to get in trouble by doing things they shouldn’t. Let me remove myself and show the teacher that I’m not part of this. I’m trying to do my work and do what I need to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>The vibe. The surroundings of the school and the people in the school. You know how sometimes you’re in a situation or need to keep your guard up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.10. X student perceptions of caring and support. Survey question CAS1: I feel cared for and supported in my school. CAS2: I am rewarded in school for doing the right things. CAS3: Most people in my school are kind and supportive.

Figure 4.10 reflects the responses of the X participants to the statements evaluating their perceptions of the level of care and support in their school. The data showed that 90% of the participants evaluated the statement, “I am rewarded in school for doing the right thing” as rarely or never true. Additionally 60% evaluated as “sometimes true” the statement “I feel cared for supported in my school.” However, 90% of the participants rated the statement, “Most people in my school are kind and nice” as rarely or never true. Table 4.11 contains quotes from X participant on caring and support.

The participants’ comments indicated their perceptions of disconnect and disengagement in the school environment as well as their bleak outlook on their future.

High expectations. Research on resiliency has established that there is a significant correlation between high expectations and successful student outcomes. Schools also communicate high expectations by providing instruction that is challenging,
comprehensive, and inclusive of multiple intelligences and multiple learning styles (Thomsen, 2002).

Figure 4.11 reflects the X students’ perception of the school’s communication of high expectations and their teachers’ beliefs in their abilities to succeed.

Forty percent of the participants evaluated the statement, “I believe that I will be successful in school” to be always true. Additionally 50 percent of them rated the statement, “My teachers believe that I can succeed” as always true. However, 50 percent of the participants evaluated the statement, “Students and teachers have a positive attitude” as rarely or never true.

Figure 4.11. X student perceptions of high expectations. Survey question HE1: I believe that I will be successful in school. HE2: My teachers believe that I can succeed. HE3: Students and teachers have a positive attitude.
Table 4.11

*X Participant Quotes on Caring and Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>I only get feedback if I fail the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X16</td>
<td>If we had a school counselor to sit down and talk about this with, they might feel so much better and feel proud of themselves. We do have adults that actually care about our wellbeing. It’s not everyone against you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>I don’t want to be here. I just take my classes and leave. I’m not staying here for no study hall either. I feel like it’s a waste of time. I feel like I’m not going to graduate on time if I stay here. I need to leave. They just teach – like if you don’t get it, you don’t get it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>Sometimes I come to school and think damn, I don’t feel like doing no work today. Like I’m in a bummy mood. Negative feedback from my teachers. Depends on how first period goes. If it goes good, I’m going to have a good day. If it’s boring, I’m going to have a boring day. But if first period is boring to me, then next class will be ridiculous. I wouldn’t want to do any activities or do stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>Sometimes I feel like I should do better in school, or pay attention instead of having a boring day or making it seem like I’m having a boring day. Sometimes I’ll be like I’m going to pay attention and do all my work in all of my classes. Some mornings I basically don’t feel like doing my work, doing my work today. My mindset all day is to not do any work. It really is. I wake up in the morning thinking if I want to take a shower or not. Then I’m on the bus thinking, do I want to do this today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X16</td>
<td>I don’t care who you are or how old you are. And it makes me feel that some people don’t care if I fail and that it’s just a job to them. If you want to be a teacher or a guidance counselor it has to be something more than just a job, like you want to work with kids and want to be there. It’s like some of them don’t’ want to be there. They come in just because they want to get paid and it’s not right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>But in this high school you’re not going to graduate on time because they don’t have anything to offer you. Why do you think everyone gets held back?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>A lot of people walking around. Lots of people refuse to go to class or try to skip some minutes of class. But there are a lot of people who walk around. It’s a good tone but they’re not doing the right thing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Opportunities for meaningful participation. When educators share power and the decision making process with students, students are able to foster resilience by cultivating problem solving, decision-making and goal-setting skills.

As shown in Table 4.12, during the interviews, the participants expressed their frustrations with the lack of engaging classes and with their feelings of boredom.

The participants’ quotes indicated their skepticism and doubt about their chances for academic success. They revealed the students’ frustrations with the school’s inability to provide meaningful support and resources geared to fostering the academic and social skills necessary for high school and beyond.

Figure 4.12 reflects the perceptions of the students on statements regarding opportunities for meaningful participation in the school.

The survey indicated that 80% of the X participants evaluated as never true the statement, “I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities.” Additionally, 70% evaluated the statement, “I am involved in extracurricular activities that help other students, school and the community” as rarely or never true. 80% of the students rated the statement, “Students, teachers and parents work together all the time” as rarely or never true.

During the interviews, the participants expressed their perceptions on opportunities for meaningful participation and decision making in the school. Quotes extracted from the interview transcripts are shown in Table 4.13.

The tone of the participants’ comments conveyed their sense of a lack of meaningful participation and opportunities for engagement in the school. Their comments indicated their frustrations and resentment about their chances for sustained success.
Research question 3. What protective factors foster educational resilience for at-risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students in a suburban high school?

The goal of the dissertation study was to understand the process of developing resilience in at-risk students in order to create a theory regarding resilience. The definitive purpose of utilizing a qualitative research method was to collect and describe data from the perspectives of the participants to develop a grounded theory of the elements involved in fostering educational resilience among at-risk 16 to 18-year-old minority students.
Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) resiliency wheel encapsulated six protective factors: (a) prosocial bonding, (b) clear and consistent boundaries, (c) teach life skills, (d) caring and support, (e) high expectations, and (f) provide opportunities for meaningful participation. These six categories served as the framework for the data collection instruments: a paper survey and intensive interviews. The Assessing School Resiliency Building survey was divided into the six categories from the resiliency wheel with three statements in section. The bar graphs generated from the survey provided visual representations of the perceptions of the 10 participants from each of the two groups. The
descriptive quantitative data allowed for comparison of the responses by category and thus identify significant trends.

Table 4.13

*X Participant Quotes on Opportunities for Meaningful Participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>Decisions are basically made on what the needs are for the school. If the senior class wants to go on a trip, we would have to ask for that. You come here, it’s loud. After a boring day, I go home and shut down and go out later to forget about the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X19</td>
<td>Everyone makes their own decisions. Students individually make their own decisions and teachers make their own. But as a whole, the school will decide what should be taught, what programs should stay and what should be after school. I feel these decisions are sometimes rushed just for the moment because there are budget cuts so they are rushed because there’s no money and they don’t even try to save it or bring something else back. I guess it depends on if there’s going to be a vote through the town and the community can decide what can stay and what can’t. It depends on who actually votes. That depends on the higher ups. I don’t know if the teachers vote on that or if it depends on who’s in charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>I think like the principals have no authority. Cause everybody still do whatever they want. The real principal doesn’t even do anything. You never see her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>There is nothing here to offer. Everything that is here, they are taking away. There is nothing here for me. They cannot offer me any classes. There’s nothing. I just take my major classes. I have community service cause they don’t have classes for me. I have 3 periods cause they don’t have classes for me. Then they tell me to go to class and when I go to class it’s a study hall. There’s nothing for me here. Unsuccessful. There is nothing here to offer. Like I still haven’t taken art or music and I’ve been here since 9th grade. And I need that to graduate. And then they’re gonna offer it to me senior year? Yea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X19</td>
<td>Learning how to solve a problem and understanding that there is a different way to act, like when you’re in school and when you’re with your friends. There’s two difference places to be acting different. At school and work you need to be more serious and with your friends you can be more relax and talk slang – whatever. So the things in general that would help me lead me to success is being able to understand there’s a time and place for things, taking orders, learning to not erupt a problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to the paper surveys, structured interviews were conducted with five participants randomly selected from each of the two groups for a total of 10 interviewed students. The two methods for collecting data minimized the possibility of losing or omitting valuable information and allowed for triangulation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, the use of these two methods of data collection increased the validity of the process, aided in developing new themes, and facilitated the eventual emergence of the grounded theory.

The first stage of the analysis, initial coding involved the segmenting of the interview data and assigning the codes to the six categories defined by the resiliency wheel (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). The researcher engaged in line by line coding, which provided insight into the participants’ thoughts, concerns, and struggles. Focused coding, the next phase of coding, created a lens through which the large data could be synthesized. Lastly, the theoretical coding process theorized how the previous codes related to each other as the premise for the emergence of a grounded theory.

The themes that emerged from each of the categories are illustrated in Table 4.14.

**Reflective reciprocity.** The recurring theme of reflective reciprocity emerged from the interviews surrounding “prosocial bonding,” and were reflective of the comments participants made about their relationships with the teachers and staff in the school. Reflective reciprocity was used to describe the connection between the teachers and students that is driven by the demeanor of the students. Reflective reciprocity was identified as the paralleled or mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students are reflective of students’ responses to teachers.
A comment from one of the Q participants illustrated how positive relationships with their teachers are contingent upon positive interactions.

For the most part, all my relationships with my teachers are pretty good. I would say that the only ones that weren’t good was because of me. Freshman year I had a lot of rifts with teachers only because of things I was going through. Some teachers don’t respond well to you not doing their work. They don’t like you. (Q4).

**Unconditional and consistent empathy and care.** Unconditional and consistent empathy and care were identified as being significant protective factors that cultivate resilience for at-risk students. Empathy, the ability to know how another feels and understand another’s perspective, is a hallmark of resilience. (Werner, 1989, 1992). Empathy not only fosters relationship development, it also helps form the basis of morality, forgiveness, and compassion and caring for others. (Benard, 2004). This protective factor has been shown to be crucial in schools that serve at-risk students because it challenges educators to look beyond the obvious display of behaviors and instead seek strategies geared to engaging each student’s intrinsic drive to succeed.

Caring relationships in schools are crucial to adolescence as well as younger children. A common finding in resilience research has been the power of a teacher to tip the scale from risk to resilience. (Benard, 2004) Caring teachers convey loving support, trust, and unconditional love and acceptance. When at risk students were asked to define the qualities they wanted in their teachers, they responded by stating that they wanted teachers who are caring and who are relentless in refusing to let them fail (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997).
Table 4.14

*Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Bonding</td>
<td>Relationships with Teachers/Staff</td>
<td>Reflective Reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear Consistent Boundaries</td>
<td>Model the Way and Encourage the Heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations for/from Staff</td>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Life Skills</td>
<td>Managing Emotions</td>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring and Support</td>
<td>Social and Emotional Negotiations</td>
<td>Emotional Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Engaging and Meaningful Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for Meaningful Participation</td>
<td>Lack of Meaningful Experiences</td>
<td>Engaging and Meaningful Curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Model the way and encourage the heart.* Analysis of the interviews revealed that there was a lack of leadership from the administrators in the school. Additionally, as illustrated in Table 4.15, students commented on the lack of school spirit and positive interactions between administrators and students.
Table 4.15

_X Participant Quotes on Lack of School Spirit and Positive Interactions with Administrators_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>I think like the principals have no authority. Cause everybody still do whatever they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>No authority. The real principal doesn’t even do anything. You never see her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>I only get feedback if I fail the class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kouzes and Posner (2007) indicated that effective leaders, “speak out on matters of values and conscience” (p. 47). A positive school climate conducive to student achievement is one of the many characteristics of effective school leaders (Cotton, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified five practices of highly effective leaders:

- Model the way,
- Inspire a shared vision,
- Challenge the process,
- Enable others to act, and
- Encourage the heart

Two of these practices, modeling the way and encouraging the heart, are meaningful opportunities for school leaders to demonstrate visible behaviors that foster and support a positive school culture. School leaders who “model the way” are clear about their guiding values, effectively communicate those values and model the behaviors that they expect from others. Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggested, “leaders’
deeds are far more important than their words when one wants to determine how serious leaders really are about what they say” (p. 16). School leaders who model the way interact and engage with students on an ongoing basis to demonstrate their commitment to their academic success.

“Encourage the heart” is another strategy that effective leaders implement to cultivate and nurture a resiliency-building learning environment (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Leaders who encourage the heart “know that celebrations and rituals, when done with authenticity and from the heart, build a strong sense of collective identity and community spirit that can carry a group through extraordinarily tough times” (Kouzes & Posner, p. 23). Additionally, school leaders who encourage the heart hold high expectations for and believe in their students and teachers. Consequently, students who feel affirmed and appreciated develop an increased sense of self-worth, which in turns fosters success in all aspects of their lives.

**Emotional intelligence.** The concept of incorporating emotional intelligence skills into the curriculum in schools for at risk students is crucial for fostering resilience. IQ tests are no longer perceived as the only measure of success or intelligence; emotional intelligence, play a significant role in a person’s success (Goleman 1995). Goleman suggested that emotional intelligence, the core of resilience is “at times more powerful” than IQ. Since the role of educators is to prepare their students for life and its challenges then the emotional side of learning is a crucial component for success.

Emotional intelligence was defined as the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide ones thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Findings from the dissertation
research suggested that emotional intelligence as a protective factor was applicable for fostering resilience for the at-risk students in Hudson River High school as evidenced by the following quotes:

There is a connection between emotion and cognition. Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey (2000) viewed emotion as one of the three fundamental classes of mental operations, which include motivation, emotion and cognition. Students who exemplified positive quality emotions and feelings were motivated to achieve and give their best effort in the classroom. Accordingly, it is critical that educators understand that any stress on the affective domain of the learners affects the cognitive domain. The correlation between the ability to learn and the ability to manage emotions has become more apparent as more research has been conducted on brain-based learning. For instance, “in the classroom a student can perceive even a mild stressor to be threatening, initiating the stress response and lessening the student’s ability to perform” (Wolfe, 2001, p. 110) . Thomsen (2002) recommended that it is important that educators always recognize the inside emotion behind the outward emotion.

Table 4.16

*Participant Quotes on Emotion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>When I’m mad? I don’t know…I can’t control myself. I take things into my own hands. Conflict! But I don’t start it – they start it. I just finish. I feel like I try to stay out of trouble so much, oh my God. And then, it’s just a struggle. Somebody always wants to start something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>Like if I have a conflict with someone, I’m going to confront them and see how it goes from there. Because I don’t like people messing with me. That’s my way of dealing with things. I know there’s other ways. Go to a teacher or security but I don’t believe in that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Accordingly, students who struggle with emotional issues are unable to achieve their potential. “Emotional aptitude is a meta-ability and determines how well we can use other skills, including raw intelligence” (Goleman, 1995). Wolfe (2001) advised, “emotion is a double-edged sword, with the ability to enhance learning or impede it” (p. 111).

Schools can facilitate the development of emotional intelligence in at-risk students by providing them opportunities to develop skills in five areas that Salovey and Mayer (1990) deemed to be crucial for resiliency building:

- Knowing one’s emotions,
- Managing one’s emotions,
- Motivating oneself,
- Recognizing emotions in others,
- Handling relationships.

At-risk students’ awareness of their emotions and the emotions of others will enhance their abilities to foster meaningful relationships, achieve greater success in school, and lead a more fulfilling life.

**Engaging and meaningful real world connected curriculum - Service learning**

As shown in Table 4.16, participants in the dissertation research repeatedly commented about their lack of engaging, meaningful curricular opportunities and about their frustrations with budgetary constraints that limited crucial resources in the school.
Table 4.17  

*Participant Quotes on Lack of Engaging, Meaningful Curriculum*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>There is nothing here to offer. Everything that is here to offer, they are taking away. Like I still haven’t taken art or music and I’ve been here since 9th grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>But there probably should be events that encourage kids to continue doing their work. Maybe in classrooms there could be different ways of teaching, to engage the students so they are not always bored in class and always drawing on their notebook.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A characteristic of schools that have cultivated resilience and closed the achievement gap has been their refusal to limit the opportunities for lower achieving students (James et al 2001). Service learning was identified as a protective factor that provides real world meaning and engagement in the academic lives of at risk students.

Service Learning is defined as

curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities. The service must: be organized in relation to an academic course or curriculum, have clearly stated learning objectives, address real community needs in a sustained manner over a period of time, and assist students in drawing lessons from the service through regularly scheduled, organized reflection or critical analysis activities. (Westat, 1999, p.3)

Service learning was applicable as a protective factor that correlated with the six categories in the resiliency wheel in that it builds assets in at-risk students and increases their ability to be resilient. (Thomsen, 2002). Service learning fosters active learning engagement as it motivates students to be successful. Through service learning, students
learn to offer care and support to others as well as to receive it. It also provides meaning to learning because it is connected to the real world. It is an easily accessible and inexpensive resource that integrates structure, and creativity to learning. According to Thomsen (2002) students acquire many life skills through service learning such as conflict resolution, communication, organizational and problem-solving skills. Thomsen suggested that service learning is a character-building, resiliency-building, asset-building strategy that incorporates students’ learning styles and intelligences, and it fosters interest and engagement and even motivates the most reluctant learners.

**Summary of Results**

Findings from the dissertation research illustrated students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency from the perspective of the resiliency wheel.

**Prosocial bonding.** The majority of the high performing students (Q participants) indicated they had positive relationships with their teachers, but they indicated that they recognized that their behaviors determined the tone of the relationships. Thus, if they demonstrated inappropriate behaviors in class, they recognized that in turn their teachers would act unfavorably toward them.

The lower performing students (X participants) also recognized this reciprocal relationship. However, they also indicated that if a teacher demonstrated a negative attitude towards them, they were willing to reciprocate.

**Clear and consistent boundaries.** The Q students indicated that the majority of them understood the rules, regulations, and decision-making process of the school and were aware of consequences for inappropriate behaviors. However, during the interviews
some participants expressed their lack of comprehension of the viability of the rules as well as the teachers’ and administrators’ responses to students’ misbehaviors.

The X participants also indicated their awareness of the school’s rules. However, they expressed the lack of practicality of some of the rules and the exclusion of students in the decision making process. During the interviews, the X participants expressed frustration with the lack of engaging classes and with their feelings of boredom.

**Teaching life skills.** The Q participants acknowledged that they dealt with conflicts in a responsible manner because they recognized the consequences for getting involved in a physical altercation. Additionally they stated that they do whatever it takes to avoid conflicts.

The X participants communicated that it was sometimes a struggle to stay out of a conflict because they were constantly being challenged. They also indicated that they were ready to defend themselves when necessary.

**Caring and support.** During the interviews, the Q participants expressed the importance of fostering a good relationship with their teachers, and they described the correlation between good behavior and positive relationship with their teachers.

During the interviews the X participants expressed frustration with the lack of engaging classes and with their feelings of boredom. Additionally, 90% of the X participants evaluated the statement, “I am rewarded in school for doing the right thing” as rarely or never true.

**High expectations.** During the interviews, the Q participants expressed their concerns about the quality of instruction provided to them. They also were concerned about teachers’ and students’ inconsistent attitudes towards academic achievement. Even
though many of the Q participants acknowledged that the quality of education offered to them was inferior, they recognized that they must do their best anyway because of the effect of their grades on their futures.

The majority of the X participants also expressed concern about the lack of meaningful or engaging instruction and their negative impressions of school as a consequence.

**Opportunities for meaningful participation.** The majority of the Q participants evaluated the statement, “I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities” to be rarely or never true, They also rated the statement, “Students, teachers and parents work together all the time” as rarely or never true. Furthermore, they identified the lack of student involvement in the decision making process.

Nearly all of the X participants evaluated as never true the statement, “I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities.” The majority also evaluated the statement, “I am involved in extracurricular activities that help other students, school and the community” as rarely or never true. Most of them also rated the statement, “Students, teachers and parents work together all the time” as rarely or never true.

The findings of the dissertation research indicated that both groups of participants recognized that the quality of education they received was not meaningful and engaging. However the higher performing group was able to look beyond their current situation and recognize that they must do their best in order to overcome the odds. The X participants demonstrated cynicism and skepticism about the school’s ability to prepare them for successful lives.
The overarching theme that emerged was the Reflective Reciprocity Syndrome, which the researcher defined as the paralleled or mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students are reflective of students’ responses to teachers. This condition was evidenced from the quotes of the participants. Specifically, they acknowledged that positive relationships with their teachers were contingent upon their “good” behaviors. This finding is consistent with Benard’s (1991) argument that educators must build caring and supportive relatives with their students that are built on empathy, compassion, respect, trust, and understanding. Educators must embody these humanistic beliefs before they can begin to work to mitigate the challenges and stresses that at risk-students encounter.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research is to gain greater insight and understanding regarding how 16 to 18-year-old at risk students in a suburban high school perceive the levels of support that foster educational resilience. Educational resilience is defined as “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994).

Historically, educators have been guided by a risk deficit view of students, which is driven by identifying students’ deficits, weaknesses, and problems with minimal attention given to employing interventions or support systems geared to building on students’ strengths (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). This deficit view of students results in the labeling of students, which creates self-fulfilling prophecies rather than opportunities to foster resilience. It also precipitates the mindset of educators to interact with at-risk children and their families through a deficit lens only. Benard (1991) suggests that this "glass-is-half-empty" approach prohibits educators from seeing the capacity and strength of students and from hearing the “real story,” thereby creating stereotypes or “myths” about their students.

This qualitative study was designed to examine at-risk students’ perception of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school in order to gain greater understanding of the process of developing educational resilience in at risk students. The qualitative inquiry and analysis uncovered a conceptual theme that emerged from the
interviews: Reflective Reciprocity Syndrome. Reflective reciprocity syndrome illustrates the participants’ descriptions of the conditions that influence the nature of their relationships with their teachers. Participants from both the Q and X groups depict their relationships with their teachers as contingent on their attitudes toward their teachers. Participants’ quotes indicate that positive interactions with teachers are precipitated by their positive attitudes, and negative attitudes from students result in negative responses from teachers.

Table 5.1

**Participant Quotes Indicating Interactions with Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>I think I have a good relationship with my teachers. I do everything I need to do to pass the classes they put me in. I don’t say “this is not my thing”. I try everything, even if I cannot keep up. I try everything to pass the class and move on to the next class. I don’t always talk or do bad things. I always try to be as good as I can. I want the teacher to be proud of me and not yelling at me. And that works for me – not being bad or fighting all the time. I learn more by doing that and pass the class. The ones who are always talking don’t learn anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>My teachers like me so pretty good I guess. I’m kind and polite. I’m not a jerk either. They love having me in class. I’ve only gotten kicked out of class once. I know my place in class and don’t get out of line. I’m respectful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X11</td>
<td>I have a great relationship with all of my teachers. Personally I don’t like some of them just because sometimes they can be a little rude with their tone of voice. They aren’t fully to blame because I could be putting them up to it by maybe not doing my work or paying attention or talking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quotes shown in Table 5.1 demonstrate that the participants are acutely aware of how their actions significantly influence their relationships with their teachers. As a
result, the participants assume responsibility, or in some cases blame themselves, for negative reactions from their teachers.

Consequently, the classrooms are devoid of viable and rich engagements and interactions, and this results in boredom for the students. The quotes in Table 5.2 capture students’ perception of the lack of engagement in their classrooms.

Table 5.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>Sometimes I feel like I should do better in school, or pay attention instead of having a boring day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>Maybe in classrooms there could be different ways of teaching, to engage the students so they are not always bored in class and always drawing on their notebook.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reflective reciprocity syndrome is a deterrent to fostering student resilience because it obstructs the facilitation of key protective factors such as trust, unconditional acceptance, care, and support that must be present in a resiliency building learning environment.

Implications of Findings

The dissertation research examined at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school and identified a significant factor that hindered educational resilience: reflective reciprocity.

Reflective reciprocity syndrome. Findings from the examination of at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school suggest that students’ positive interactions with teachers are usually the result of
positive student behavior. This relationship is characterized by the term, reflective
reciprocity syndrome. Reflective reciprocity syndrome is defined as the paralleled or
mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students
are reflective of students’ responses to teachers. Table 5.3 includes quotes taken from the
interview transcripts that illustrate reflective reciprocity syndrome.

Table 5.3

*Participant Quotes Illustrating Reflective Reciprocity Syndrome*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>For the most part, all my relationships with my teachers are pretty good. I would say that the only ones that weren’t good was because of me. Freshman year I had a lot of rifts with teachers only because of things I was going through. Some teachers don’t respond well to you not doing their work. They don’t like you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>I always try to be as good as I can. I want the teacher to be proud of me and not yelling at me. And that works for me – not being bad or fighting all the time. I learn that by doing that I pass the class. The ones who are always talking don’t learn anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>Well there are some kids who have issues with their teachers probably because they are not used to their work ethics. Any they don’t try to work out the situation. Others probably have issues in school but don’t really tell the teachers. They just go with the class structure. I mean, it’s like they don’t really care. They are just there in the classroom listening to what the teacher says but they don’t really understand how the teacher says something. I understand where they’re coming from. There are some teachers that have different work ethics that I’m also not used to. But I still try to work it out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20</td>
<td>My relationship with my teachers is very close. I would say because from the beginning of the year, I make my presence known to them. I introduce myself and try to get myself connected to them. By the middle of the year if I miss an assignment, they are very understanding. If I need to do a make-up, they provide me with extra assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflective reciprocity syndrome conveys the message that in order to pass the class and to have a positive relationship with their teacher, students must conceal their inner stressors and emotions and instead outwardly display behaviors that will not create disruptions for the teachers. Table 5.4 contains quotes that illustrate how students conceal their inner stressors and emotions.

Table 5.4

| Participant Quotes Illustrating How Students Conceal Inner Stressors and Emotions |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Student Identifier** | **Quote**                                                                                      |
| X11              | I have to put up with them for the whole year so I just not really bother them and do my work. So then they can’t hold anything against me, like “I’m gonna fail him because he hasn’t done his work”. |
| X15              | My teachers like me so pretty good I guess. I’m kind and polite. I’m not a jerk either. They love having me in class. I’ve only gotten kicked out of class once. I know my place in class and don’t get out of line. I’m respectful. |
| Q11              | I try everything, even if I cannot keep up. I try everything to pass the class and move on to the next class. I don’t always talk or do bad things. I always try to be as good as I can. I want the teacher to be proud of me and not yelling at me. And that works for me – not being bad or fighting all the time. I learn more by doing that and pass the class. The ones who are always talking don’t learn anything. |
| X19              | Well I don’t want to say for everybody, but for me when I first came here, maturity was not something on my mind. As time goes on, you learn (well not for everybody) but for me, I need to stop acting like that, stop being ignorant and expecting people to be nice to me when I’m not shelling out respect. |
| Q3               | They give you the work you need to do and if you don’t do it, it’s your fault. |

Research on resilience strongly suggests that teachers must be relentless and unwavering in their support and care for all students; especially so for at-risk students.
Relationships are significant for cultivating resilience in at-risk students. It is through caring relationships that the needs for love and belonging and for connection are met. The factor of caring relationships is a critical motivational foundation for successful academic development.

Knowledge of reflective reciprocity syndrome is a significant concept to be taught within effective teacher professional development because the results of the dissertation study indicate that there is a need for transformation in how instruction is delivered to at-risk students. Participants indicate that they become bored and disconnected because of the lack of engagement in the instruction provided to them. As a result the students are sometimes plagued by truancy, distractions and disruptions. Table 5.5 contains quotes that demonstrate students’ perceptions of being disconnected from instruction.

Reflective reciprocity must never be evident in the school environment because it is imperative that educators of at-risk students understand the significance of their roles in these students’ lives. They must understand that their purpose is to mold and groom these students to be productive and creative global citizens, and they must utilize students’ mishaps and mistakes as opportunities to foster resilience. Teachers must not internalize or respond negatively to students’ apparent actions.

Many participants in the dissertation research indicate that their teachers were favorable only when students were well behaved and took responsibility when the teachers were upset and yelled at them. Some participants even stated that they were not always well behaved in school because of stressors they were experiencing out of school.
Table 5.5

Participant Quotes Demonstrating Lack of Connection to Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Identifier</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>I don’t understand why we learn half the things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>The classes don’t really talk about what’s going to happen later in life, how to manage your money, buy a car, get insurance – no one knows how to do that. It saddens me because how are kids supposed to know what to do in the future and in real life when they have no gateways to things like that. It makes me feel sad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>The tone in the school I’m guessing is not that great at the moment. What I mean by tone is that there’s nothing engaging or entertaining I guess. Seems like every day is the same thing. But there probably should be events that encourage kids to continue doing their work. Maybe in classrooms there could be different ways of teaching, to engage the students so they are not always bored in class and always drawing on their notebook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>I feel like with the opportunities that were available to me, I took that and learned what I could. But I also feel that I was denied things that other schools may have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>Oh see I don’t think we learn anything. I don’t. I hate being in school. When I come to this school, I get depressed. I don’t want to be here. This is not an environment I want to be in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X7</td>
<td>I don’t want to be here. I just take my classes and leave. I’m not staying here for no study hall either. I feel like it’s a waste of time. I feel like I’m not going to graduate on time if I stay here. I need to leave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X15</td>
<td>I wake up in the morning thinking if I want to take a shower or not. Then I’m on the bus thinking, do I want to do this today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X16</td>
<td>If there’s a bad vibe in the classroom, I’m gonna be in a bad mood. If the whole classroom is out of control, I’m going to be in a very bad mood. Just the vibe – how people listen to the teachers and how the teachers talk to the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X16</td>
<td>I don’t care who you are or how old you are. And it makes me feel that some people don’t care if I fail and that it’s just a job to them. If you want to be a teacher or a guidance counselor it has to be something more than just a job, like you want to work with kids and want to be there. It’s like some of them don’t want to be there. They come in just because they want to get paid and it’s not right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mitigating reflective reciprocity syndrome. Reflective reciprocity syndrome is apparent within Hudson River High School because the transformation in the student population has been extremely challenging for schools since increased rigor and mandates are coupled with diminished school resources and decreased teacher enthusiasm. Henderson and Milstein (2003) indicate, “the educator workplace is significantly older than in the past.” Furthermore, many suburban schools are stigmatized by professional longevity because as the student population has changed, many educators have remained in the same roles in the same schools for their entire careers. This combination of a long time in the profession in the same school and in the same role can lead to a perception of being plateaued (Bardwick, 1986; Milstein, 1990) which can be detrimental to student resiliency.

It is recommended that school administrators mitigate reflective reciprocity syndrome by incorporating educator resiliency training in professional development plans as well as holding teachers accountable for cultivating resiliency in students. This way of thinking must be infused into the school’s culture. It is also recommended that reflective reciprocity syndrome can be assuaged through transformative leadership, and the implementation of multiple intelligence based instruction. Figure 5.1 contains an illustration of how reflective reciprocity syndrome is created and how the three recommended strategies can work to mitigate the syndrome.
Figure 5.1. Strategies for mitigating reflective reciprocity syndrome.
Implement educator resiliency training. In order to mitigate the disconnection between teachers, the student population, and teaching in general, teachers should be provided with educator resiliency training. Such training builds on Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) resiliency wheel, but focuses on supporting teachers within the educational environment. Figure 5.1 shows the elements of educator resiliency training and how it relates to mitigating reflective reciprocity syndrome.

Implement transformative leadership. The lack of effective guidance and direction for the teachers in Hudson River School contributes to the Reflective Reciprocity Syndrome where the teacher directed school culture has transitioned in bored, unmotivated students and sustained “chalk and talk” instruction. This has resulted in a punitive school culture where teacher and student interactions have not been productive and suspensions have been the governing tool to maintain order in the building. In order to mitigate reflective reciprocity syndrome, the school administrators should engage in transformative leadership. Kotter (1990) argued that what sets leadership apart from management is its targeted focus on change. Figure 5.1 shows the eight steps Kotter recommended for implementing transformative leadership in schools.

Address student learning styles through multiple intelligences. The reflective reciprocity syndrome precipitates a lack of academic achievement as a result of the contentious relationship between teachers and students coupled with the lack of meaningful academic engagement that produces student boredom and disengagement. Although the participants are intrinsically driven to succeed, they are faced with the challenges and obstacles to learning in the school. The reflective reciprocity syndrome prohibits an educator’s ability to appreciate the strengths and potentials in their students,
and interferes with their ability to identify students’ learning styles or intelligences. Furthermore, Hanson and Dewing (1990) claim at-risk learners not successful because their learning styles are not addressed in school, and Thomsen (2002) suggests that many teachers often provide instruction in the same manner as they were taught or in techniques that are aligned with their own learning styles. Consequently, reflective reciprocity syndrome develops as students become disenfranchised and disengaged from instruction, resulting in disengagement from their teachers. Implementing Gardner’s (1983) instruction based on multiple intelligences may minimize student disengagement, which will then reduce the development of reflective reciprocity syndrome. Figure 5.1 shows the elements of Gardner’s theory and how it can contribute to the mitigation of reflective reciprocity syndrome.

Limitations of the Study

The qualitative research study described in this dissertation examined at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school. Twenty students were randomly selected from computer-generated reports. The names of all at-risk students with grade point averages of 85% and above, (identified as Q participants) were placed in a hat and the names of all at-risk students with grade point averages of 68% and below (identified as X participants) were placed in another hat and ten names were then randomly selected from each hat. Both groups of students are considered economically disadvantaged because they were recipients of free or reduced school lunch. All 20 students completed the Assessing School Resiliency Survey, and using the same random selection protocol, five students from each group were selected to participate in the interviews.
There were two limitations to the dissertation research. Increased sample size of participants would have generated a more accurate data set. Charmaz (2006) recommends including 20 to 30 participants in a study in order to develop a well-saturated theory. Another limitation was that 10 participants were randomly selected to be interviewed. A purposeful sampling based on survey responses may have led to greater insight into the perceptions of the participants.

**Recommendations**

Winfield (1994) suggests that schools must change their practices to include strategies to foster and build students’ protective processes during critical and challenging times in their lives. Protective factors are assets that individuals actively use to cope with, adapt to, or overcome vulnerability or risks. (Masten et al., 1991). Wang et al. (1994) suggest that effective schools—particularly those that serve at-risk students—must incorporate instructional strategies that promote the self-efficacy, independence, and a sense of belonging for at-risk students.

The dissertation research on at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school includes a review of the impact of protective factors that foster resiliency: prosocial bonding; clear, consistent boundaries; teaching life skills; caring and support; high expectations; and opportunities for meaningful participation.

The analysis of the data led to the identification of a factor that needs to be mitigated in order for student resiliency to be fostered: reflective reciprocity syndrome. The reflective reciprocity syndrome emerged during the analysis of participants’ quotes as a factor that creates contention between educators and at-risk students. Reflective
reciprocity syndrome is defined as the paralleled or mirrored interactions between teachers and students where teachers’ responses to students are reflective of students’ responses to teachers.

Rather than displaying actions aligned with the reflective reciprocity syndrome, it is recommended that educators implement strategies and behaviors that are aligned with the protective factors defined with Henderson and Milstein’s (2003) resiliency wheel.

Conclusion

For nearly two decades prevention and education discourse has been awash with the language of risk. Researchers have documented that between 1989 and 1994, over 2,500 articles were published on "children and families at risk" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p.1). Over 40 years of social science research has identified poverty as the single significant factor most likely to put a person "at risk" for school failure (Currie, 1994; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Males, 1996). Factors associated with poverty that place a child at risk for academic failure include low parental education, joblessness, abuse and neglect, substance abuse, unsafe neighborhoods, homelessness, and deficient early childhood educational experiences.

The qualitative research described in this dissertation examined 20 at-risk high school students’ perceptions of the factors that foster resiliency in their suburban high school. The Assessing School Resiliency Survey and interviews were utilized to gather data. The significant finding of the dissertation research was the identification of the reflective reciprocity syndrome, an element that impedes educational resilience in at-risk students because it prohibits educators from utilizing a strengths-based lens to view their students’ potentials.
Data from the research also suggests that students are acutely aware of this dynamic in the school environment and take responsibility and culpability for defining the tone of the teacher-student relationship. Consequently, the classroom is void of viable engagement and interactions and results in boredom for the students.

It is imperative that educators perceive their roles as significant in the lives of students. Too often teachers expect perfection from their students without regard for the challenges and obstacles that their students face. Empathy is a pertinent factor for connecting and bonding with at-risk students who are surrounded with numerous risk factors, and it is a key for minimizing factors related to the reflective reciprocity syndrome.

As an educator, the researcher who conducted the dissertation study often compared the connections between medical doctors and their patients to teachers and their students. Medical doctors are held to a very high standard by the Hippocratic Oath, in which they pledge to perform their utmost best for every patient. Educators also must assume the same role and pledge to perform their utmost for every student they encounter. They need to see each student as an individual and not just as a label. Educators must also realize that when a student succeeds, the impact of this honor resonates for generations.
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Appendix A

ASSESSING SCHOOL RESILIENCY BUILDING

Evaluate the following elements of school resiliency building using a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 indicating “This is always true”, 2 indicating “This is sometimes true, “3 indicating “This is rarely true,” and 4 indicating “This is never true.”

Circle the number that represents your answer to the statement. Do not write your name on the survey. The answers to the survey are anonymous.

PROSOCIAL BONDING

1  2  3  4  I have a positive connection with at least one caring adult in my school.
1  2  3  4  I participate in after school activities.
1  2  3  4  I trust at least one adult in my school.

CLEAR, CONSISTENT BOUNDARIES

1  2  3  4  I understand the rules and regulations of the school.
1  2  3  4  I am aware of the consequences for inappropriate behaviors.
1  2  3  4  I know whom to go to in my school when I have a conflict with another student.
TEACHING LIFE SKILLS
1 2 3 4 I deal with conflicts in a responsible manner.
1 2 3 4 I learn in school how to make responsible life decisions.
1 2 3 4 My school prepares me for life beyond high school.

CARING AND SUPPORT
1 2 3 4 I feel cared for and supported in my school.
1 2 3 4 I am rewarded in school for doing the right things.
1 2 3 4 Most people in my school are kind and supportive.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS
1 2 3 4 I believe that I will be successful in school.
1 2 3 4 My teachers believe that I can succeed.
1 2 3 4 Students and teachers have a positive attitude.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION
1 2 3 4 I am involved in extracurricular activities that help other students, school, and the community.
1 2 3 4 I am involved in student government and or in other decision making opportunities.
1 2 3 4 Students, teachers and parents work together all the time.
Appendix B

Interview Questions

ASSESSING SCHOOL RESILIENCY BUILDING

1. Do you feel connected with an adult in the school? Please explain.

2. Please describe how you respond to conflicts with other students in school.

3. What life skills are essential for success? Are those skills taught in school?

4. How would you describe the tone/culture in the school?
5. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?

6. How are decisions made in the school?