RESILIENCY: FACTORS AFFECTING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMNET

OF AT RISK FIFTH GRADE GIRLS

LIVING IN POVERTY

by

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ABSTRACT

RESILIENCY: FACTORS AFFECTING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMNET

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University of Houston – Clear Lake, 2016

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In this study, the researcher explored the perceptions of academically successful at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty regarding risk factors present in their everyday lives. Also, the researcher explored the various coping processes these students used to negotiate life stressors to be academically successful. Therefore, the study was designed to examine resilience from the girls' perspectives, allowing them to share their stories about their success in school. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What protective factors contribute to resilience in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

2. What effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

The researcher collected and analyzed qualitative data from focus group sessions composed of five girls.

The findings revealed that life stressors such as unclear expectations of teachers, experiencing a loss, and bullying caused life disruptions. In addition, the girls discussed how several coping processes like establishing and maintaining positive friendships, having a role model, and possessing certain inner qualities help them to achieve academic success.

Findings suggest that educators must respect and value girls' assessment of their own academic success and allowing girls to enable their voice. In doing this, the practitioner can learn explicitly what works for at risk yet academically successful girls and perhaps apply it in closing opportunity gaps. In addition, after girls are encouraged to enable their voice, educators need to assist and support girls as they determine what changes they can implement to increase their self-efficacy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Arguably, American society has favored the growth of its sons more than the growth of its daughters. Despite significant ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic variations in the life experiences of young women, most adolescent girls mature in an American society that privileges men over women in the labor market and in cultural life (Card, Mas, Moretti, & Saez, 2012; Herbert & Stipek, 2005; Peters, 2002; Phillips, 1998; Pipher, 1994). Additionally, American society places an extraordinary amount of pressure on girls to strive towards feminine ideals (i.e., physical attractiveness being the most important quality), has high rates of violence against women and girls, and presents girls with contradictory sexual messages (Fagan & Wright, 2012; Milner, 2010; Peters, 2002; Phillips, 1998; Pipher, 1994;). The results of this study could provide information on environments, relationships, and support systems that are conducive to building resiliency in young girls despite their risks. A better understanding of ways to enhance resilience in all children holds great promise for improving the effectiveness of preventive community, school, and family services (Kumpfer, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman, 2012; Zoloski & Bullock, 2012).

Need for the Study

In this current era of school reform, educators are held accountable for not only the academic achievement of all students with particular focus on non-White and poor students but also for closing the achievement gap between these students and their more affluent and White peers. This accountability is of particular concern to urban educators because urban schools serve a disproportionate number of minority and poor students,

who are at risk of school failure (Bryk, 2010; Rodriguez, 2014; Washington, 2008). Efforts by schools to reduce the minority achievement gap have often focused on blaming minority students for what are perceived as individual and cultural deficits residing within the student, the student's family and the student's community (Washington, 2008).

The achievement gap in education is typically concentrated on students' scores on standardized tests, student graduation rates, and gifted and talented placements as well as other data that compares groups of students (Milner, 2012). Boykin and Noguera (2011) expounded on the achievement gap that has existed between affluent and poorer school districts and noted the structural inequalities and inequalities based on biases that lead some schools to be successful while others fail. Howard (2010) suggested that viewing the achievement gap solely on the aforementioned basis, forced one to conceptualize students of color from a deficit perspective. Identifying how these gaps work or how they affect students could change established perspectives.

Opportunity gaps are those gaps that exist inherently in school systems such as teacher experience, classroom as well as district resources, and academic rigor (Milner, 2012). When these concerns are considered, much research is focused on the outcomes (achievement) rather than on the processes (opportunity). Milner (2012) argued that the focus needs to expand from merely gaps in achievement, and emphasis should be extended to include gaps in opportunity. The opportunity gap refutes that all students live and operate in an environment that is both equal and equitable in the opportunities afforded to them (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Milner & Williams, 2008; Tate, 2008). Boykin and Noguera (2011) gave further details on the opportunity gap that has existed between affluent and poorer school districts and noted the structural and bias inequalities.

Researchers (Benard, 2004; Conklin, 2002; Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Klem & Cornell, 2004; Waggoner, 1999) found a link that positively impacts young girls' academic success when educators provide support them with a positive, personal relationship characterized by respect, trust, and caring (Downey, 2008). Accordingly, results from the Klem and Cornell (2004) study indicated that students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school have more positive academic attitudes and values than those without these types of relationships. Yet, despite this finding, many educators are unsure how to connect with students who are experiencing adverse life circumstances (Condly, 2006). Storer, Cychosz, and Licklider (1995) found that opportunities and relationships that promoted resiliency can be found in schools but few studies have examined this phenomenon. In the years following the Storer et al. study, Waxman, Gray, and Padrón, (2003) found that there were several characteristics that related to positive school success for students who experienced adverse life circumstances but had mentors in school. Some of the characteristics Waxman et al. (2003) found were family and peer support, positive ties to school, high levels of teacher feedback, and the students' sense of belonging to the school. Downey (2008) commented that there was no doubt that students who reside in adverse life environments that contain several risk factors will be faced with challenges along their route to academic achievement.

Within school and non-school settings, scholars have examined the links between stressors such as home environment, school attended, neighborhoods, etc., and such outcomes as academic misidentification, dropping out, delinquency, adolescent parenting, sexual violence, and depression (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2003; Rodriguez, 2010; Rose,

2012). Rarely has research highlighted the ability of students to move beyond or navigate the risks that they have encountered (Pollack, 2005). There is a gap in the literature that fails to explore the building of resiliency in at risk yet academically successful fifth grade girls. Further, there is a gap in the literature focused on risk and resilience processes that interact as a part of the relationship between girls and the worlds in which they operate.

The issue of resiliency has raised a number of questions such as: Why are some girls debilitated by setbacks, poor performance, stress, and study pressure, whereas others recover and move on? Why are some girls caught in a downward spiral of underachievement, whereas others respond proactively to poor performance and break this downward spiral? Why do some girls succumb to the pressure of school, whereas others are energized and have embraced the challenges before them? While this research was not centered on these questions, it is worthwhile that these questions be explored to understand whether they are related to the academic success of at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty.

Although much has been accomplished in making additional choices available to girls, some girls lack successful same gender role models from the same racial and cultural background to help their transition into social, personal, and academic success (Borman & Overman, 2004). In addition, exposure to difficult life settings further hinders this transition (Condly, 2006). While American society as a whole has moved away from gender-based roles, there may be difficult life challenges inherent in the cultures (structure and roles, values, beliefs and goals, and racial socialization) of which girls are a part, such as values leading them to a more nurturing (caregiver, mother, etc.)

adult role versus an academic one (Hubbard, 2005). In addition, environmental challenges faced by girls may be found in their homes, the schools they attend, or the neighborhood in which they reside (Condly, 2006). These challenges include, for example, caring for a younger sibling, lack of high quality instruction in school, and higher exposure to pressures for sexual activity. With so many life stressors, it may become difficult for girls to focus academically. The combination of life settings and a label of at risk may cause some girls to give up on their academic dreams (Frieman, 2001).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that assist in building resilience in young girls who live in poverty and that positively impact their academic success. Many students in low socio-economic school environments are not afforded the opportunity to choose which schools they attend (Kincheloe, 2004; Rodriguez 2013; Rodriguez, 2014). These students may be faced with schools that lack resources such as textbooks, technology, and rigorous educational programs as well as underprepared or inexperienced teachers (Kincheloe, 2004). Children who are born in economically disadvantaged circumstances are more likely to score lower on standardized assessments than their same age economically advantaged peers (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). Because of these factors, educators must become aware of the risks these students face as well as how they unknowingly contribute to negative student outcomes (Hall, 2007). While educators cannot control community demographics or family conditions, practices can be implemented that address the specific needs of students living in poverty who have been labeled at risk. This study examined fifth grade

girls from a low socio-economic background who were identified as at risk and who exhibited traits that helped build resilence. An examination of these traits might lead to improvements in the education of at risk students, girls in particular as the unit of analysis for this study, through the assistance in the development of more effective teacher interventions that take into account the factors that help build resiliency.

The theoretical understanding of what constitutes resilience emerged from the study of children at risk for psychopathology and problems in development related to genetic or experiential circumstances such as parental mental illness, poverty, or a combination of such risk factors (Masten, 2001). The emergence and recognition of the study of resilience in the last three decades not only represented a novel approach to the understanding of how children develop well under adverse circumstances (Engle, Castle, & Menon, 1996), but also overturned many negative assumptions and deficit-focused models about the development of children growing up under the threat of disadvantage and adversity (Masten, 2001; Rose, 2012).

Several past studies focused on why students became at risk (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Simons, Simons, Conger, & Brody, 2004; Swanson, 2004) or how they used resilience to be successful in adulthood (Bernard, 2004). Additional studies focused solely on Black or Hispanic students (Alva, 1991; Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; French, Seidman, Allen, & Alber, 2000; Fry & Gonzales, 2008) and the effects of living in poverty. Few studies have focused solely on at risk girls and the focus of those that have was limited by race and centered on high school students (Catterall, 1998; Croninger & Lee, 2001). The existing literature has failed to explore resiliency and resilience in at risk yet academically successful fifth grade girls. Exploring the lived

experiences of at risk yet academically successful fifth-grade girls and how risk and resiliency interact bridges the aforementioned gaps.

Fifth grade at risk girls were selected as the unit of analysis for several reasons: First, fifth grade corresponded to the culmination of the elementary years and a transition into middle school and adolescence and the age when typical characteristics of adolescence begin to emerge. Second, in subsequent years, additional risk factors (e.g. pregnancy and attendance) may be faced by the students, and may hinder the research design (Bailey & Baines, 2012). Third, the researcher was concerned with addressing at risk girls during the time when most parents are still actively involved in their children's education. The researcher attempted to close these three gaps in the research.

Research Questions

Knowledge of which factors have enabled girls living in poverty to succeed will help teachers and other school personnel deal more effectively with students by supporting and enhancing academic resilience and promoting resiliency in the school environment. To that end, the following research questions served as guides for the study:

RQ 1: What protective factors contribute to resilience in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

RQ2: What effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

Definition of terms

Describing children as being <u>at risk</u> is a means of predicting vulnerability or risk for a wide range of negative effects, such as school failure, dropping out of school,

poverty, drug abuse, delinquency, crime, violence, unemployment, divorce, poor health and early death (Brackenreed, 2010). In addition, the state of Texas has several criteria that identify students as at risk. These criteria include: being in PK – 3rd grade and not performing successfully on a readiness test or assessment; being retained in a previous grade; failing a state assessment; being pregnant or a parent; being placed in a District Alternative Education Program (DAEP); being expelled; being on probation; being a previous dropout; being limited English proficient (LEP); being in the care of the Department of Regulatory Services (DRS); being homeless; or residing in a residential care facility (Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), 2013). It is important to note that not all students who live in low socio-economic homes are considered at risk in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency (TEA) Texas Academic Performance Report (TARP), 2013).

Motivation can be conceptualized as students' energy and drive to learn, work effectively, and achieve to their potential at school and the behaviors that follow from this energy and drive (Fazey & Fazey, 1998; Newstead, 1998).

Economically disadvantaged students are those students enrolled in a Texas public school who qualify for free or reduced lunch or are eligible for other public assistance such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that was formerly food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Resilience is "both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and

the capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways" (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).

Resiliency is "a process of, or capability for, or the outcome of successful [life] adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances" (Garmezy & Masten, 1991, p. 459).

Resilient reintegration refers to the coping processes that result in growth, knowledge, self-understanding, and increased strength of resilient qualities (Richardson, 2002).

Self-efficacy refers to a belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1995).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature on resilience with special attention paid to the exploration of resilient qualities of at risk academically successful girls outside of a comparative framework with boys. Much of the research on resilience and resiliency has been concentrated on the circumstances that contribute to behaviors that are considered problematic rather than on the factors that encourage positive development (Masten & Obradović, 2006; Masten, 2007; Masten 2011; Minnard, 2002; Saewyc, Wang, Chittenden, Murphy & The McCreary Center Society, 2006; Smokowski,1998; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Limited research has explored the qualities of academically successful girls living in poverty (McKnight & Lopez, 2002). Therefore, this literature review will focus on the historical understanding of what constitutes resilience and resiliency as well as how theorists have added to the historical perspective.

The foundational research on resiliency literature was conducted by Werner and Smith (1982) and paved the way for future studies on resilient qualities. Their work involved a longitudinal study that spanned 30 years and focused on a multiracial population of children labeled at risk due to four major environmental factors: (1) perinatal stress, (2) poverty, (3) daily instability, and (4) serious parental mental health issues. The researchers found that, despite the environmental factors, 72 of the 200 labeled participants thrived due to the following resilient qualities: being female, socially responsible, tolerant, and having good self-esteem.

These resilient qualities were also found in Garmezy and Masten's (1991)study that investigated dysfunction in children with schizophrenic parents and found that most children grew up to be competent and warm persons. Resilient qualities such as personality disposition, an external support system, and a supportive family environment assisted in the different phases of their lives (i.e., adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, etc.). Comparison of these early studies illustrated the distinction between the definition of resilience and its function. Hence, resiliency is the process by which resilience is developed.

Theoretical Framework

Resiliency theory was the theoretical framework that guided this research study Krovetz (1999) noted that "resiliency theory is based on defining the protective factors within the family, school, and community that exist for the resilient child or adolescent, which are missing from the family, school, and community of the child or adolescent who later receives intervention" (p. 121). A more concise way of viewing resilience theory is that there is a force within everyone that pushes us to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength (Richardson, 2002). Richardson's Resilience Model as depicted in Figure 1 is a means whereby, through planned disruptions or reacting to life events, people have the opportunity to choose consciously or unconsciously the outcomes of disruptions (Krovetz, 1999). This process is called reintegration. This model shows how people begin in a comfort zone (homeostasis). They have adapted to their life situation whether good or bad and then a life stressor occurs (disruption). The person then has to reintegrate to return to her comfort zone.

Figure 1

Richardson's Resilience Model
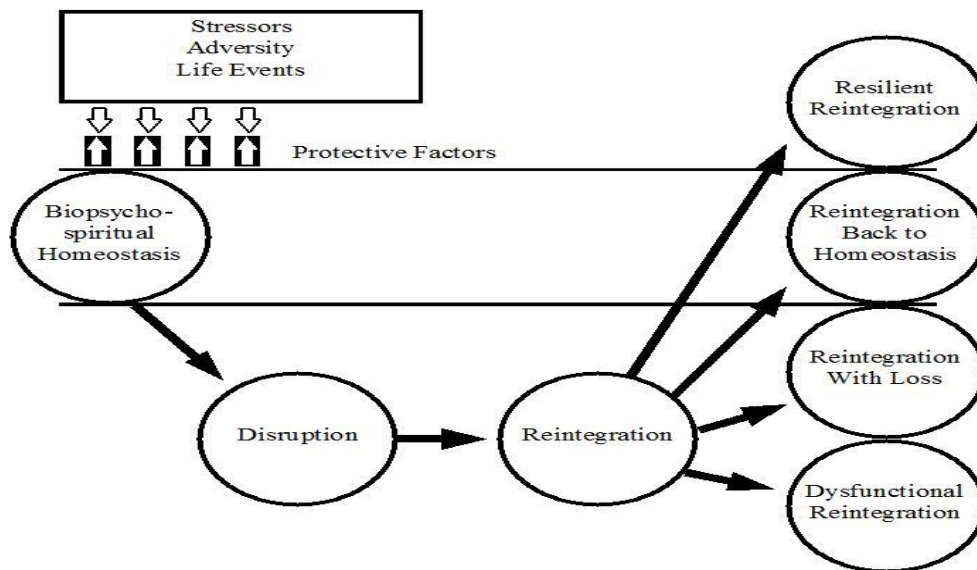
Each path back to homeostasis is unique to the cause of disruption. When a life

stressor occurs, an individual can reintegrate in four ways. Dysfunctional reintegration

causes the person to turn to disruptive behaviors such as substance abuse or other

destructive behaviors (Richardson, 2002). Reintegration with loss occurs when the

person becomes hopeless because of the disruption and loses motivation to move past the

disruption (Chan, Cardoso, & Chronister, 2009). Reintegration back to homeostasis

occurs when the person heals from the disruption through a coping process (i.e., family,

faith, friends, etc.) and returns to his/her original level of comfort (Chan et al, 2009). The

resiliency process is a life-enriching model that suggests that life stressors provide growth

and increase resilient qualities or protective factors (Richardson, 2002).

Resilient reintegration refers to the coping processes that result in growth,

knowledge, self-understanding, and increased strength of resilient qualities (Richardson,

2002). Resilient reintegration involves experiencing some type of growth through a

disruptive life event. This reintegration is an introspective process that leads to the identification of or nurturing of resilient qualities. These qualities are identified as additional protective factors when dealing with life stressors.

The present study focused on at risk fifth grade academically successful girls who reached resilient reintegration, the last manner in which one can reintegrate. Richardson (2002) stated:

> The educational experience of identifying and exploring resilience allows students to contemplate who they are and how their body, mind, and spirit function in relation to transpersonal sources of strength. Resilience as a driving force is experienced simplistically yet with profound impact as one's childlike, moral, intuitive, and noble natures. The simplifying and grouping of resilience driving forces allows students to grasp and relate to the concepts without having to be overwhelmed with numerous first-wave resilient qualities. (p. 317).

Utilizing resiliency theory as a framework allowed for a clearer understanding of the resilient qualities of at risk fifth grade girls in regards to education and the impact that these qualities may have on academic success.

Resilience and Resiliency

In an effort to further clarify the distinction between resilience and resiliency, Luthar and Zelazo (2003) defined resilience as an interactive and contextual (process) whereas resiliency addresses personal attributes of an individual. Resiliency is "a process of, or capability for, or the outcome of successful [life] adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances" (Garmezy & Masten, 1991, p. 459). The characteristics that facilitated development in the face of risk are termed resiliency. The Garmezy and

Masten study was the first of its kind and added what would later be known as protective factors to the research. Specific variables such as positive self-concept, social competence, attachment and association with positive adult role models and a supportive family environment have been identified as indices of resilience (Rutter, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Resilience has been used to refer to the ability to overcome adversity or stress in ways that are productive (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Dell, Dell, & Hopkins, 2005; Henry, Rickman, Ponder, Henderson, Mashburn, & Gordon, 2005). The focus is not necessarily on the outcome of success but rather on elements or processes that are inherent in a child and/or her or his environment and that fostered successful adaptation to potentially adverse circumstances (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Dell et al. (2005) viewed resiliency as a balance between "the ability to cope with stress and adversity and the availability of community support" (p. 4). Over the past few decades, a plethora of researchers (Conger & Conger, 2002; Howard & Johnson, 2000; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1998; Pallas, Entwisle, Alexander, & Cadigan, 1987; Seigner, 2006; Werner & Smith, 1992) have used resiliency as a possible explanation for children who emerged from economically disadvantaged situations and yet excelled in their schooling.

Resiliency has also been defined as the "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Others have described it as a bouncing back or rebound process (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1998; Seccombe, 2002). Such definitions assumed that resiliency is

independent of personality traits or dispositions, but resiliency reflects social processes through which individuals adapted to the difficulties in their lives (Brackenreed, 2010).

When adolescents are exposed to multiple life stressors, they may face negative outcomes such as decreased academic performance, disengagement from school, and delinquency. However, many adolescents overcome the risks they face and manage to obtain positive outcomes, even when others have not overcome similar risks. Rouse, Longo, and Trickett (2003) stated that, in adolescence, resilient children showed superiority over their non-resilient counterparts in measures of sociability, androgyny, autonomy, internal locus of control, and cognitive superiority. Resilient youth appeared to be capable of dealing with stress and pressure, coping with every day challenges and bouncing back from disappointments, adversity and trauma (Brooks & Goldstein, 2002). A considerable body of research has shown that young people who lack resilience have a number of risk factors in their lives. Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) noted various outcomes for economically disadvantaged youth than noon-economically disadvantaged children, such as lower academic grades, lower achievement scores, enrollment in lower tracks and special education, lower grade promotion, and higher dropout rates. Resilience has been used to explain why some children overcome seemingly overwhelming obstacles, while others become victims of their early experiences and environments (Masten, 2001).

Racial and Cultural Resiliency

Given the abundance of definitions of resilience and resiliency, it must be noted that the definitions are not homogenous and may differ across culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status (Gilgun & Abrams, 2005). The formation of a strong ethnic identity has been shown to be protective against risk factors during the upheavals

of adolescence (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2000). Such research is crucial because the social practices that encourage resilience may not be equivalent across cultures (McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005). For example, Smith, Atkins, and Connell (2003) found that Black children faced negative societal expectations simply because they are Black and therefore the parents of these children must help them overcome life stressors. If children are unable to negotiate these life stressors, they may experience lower achievement scores, enrollment in lower course tracks, placement in special education, lower rates of grade promotion, and higher drop-out rates that may not be faced by their White peers (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003). Equally important is that what may be perceived as a competency in one culture may not be perceived as a competency in another (García Coll, Lamberty, Jenkins, Pipes McAdoo, Crnie, Hanna Wasik, and Vázquez García, 1996), Likewise, Delgado and Ford (1998) surmised it is important for researchers to study children within the socio-cultural context in which they are raised because development cannot be separated from the unique cultural heritage of children. Developmental competencies of children include cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, bicultural, and coping with racism. Child characteristics, family, and culture impact the developmental competencies in minority children (García Coll et al., 1996).

Since culture and learning are inseparable (Arrington & Wilson, 2000), further studies on risk and resiliency must incorporate culture and diversity to further address processes that promote resiliency. Culture has been referred to as collective conventions, values, and practices indigenous to, and endorsed by, groups that potentially mutually define, maintain, and interconnect group members (Ungar, 2008). Benard (2004) and Hanley and Noblit (2009) found that a positive identification with one's own culture

increased resiliency traits because extended families, religious structures, and ethnic social systems latently encouraged resilient behavior (Masten & Powell, 2003; McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005).

Hanley and Noblit (2009) found that a positive racial and cultural identity can be a major factor that promotes academic success and resilience. This may be especially true for Latino girls, many of whom come from immigrant homes in which parents were educated in another country (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Families of girls from poor and/or immigrant backgrounds may lack communication skills, knowledge and experience to take advantage of educational, cultural and social opportunities when presented (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). For Latino girls, it is best to maintain strong ties to their Latino heritage while they participate in mainstream culture. This often results in Latino girls becoming disengaged from education (Ginorio & Huston, 2001) because, based on traditional gender socialization practices, Latino parents tend to socialize their girls more than their boys toward placing a greater importance on family relationships (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). Although in some multicultural contexts hegemonic cultural practices may limit and oppress (Van der Walt & Bowman, 2007), culture can also promote resilience. According to Pomrenke (2007), as family members (or others perceived as family) interact with each other, they find existing strengths and create new ones through shared reverence and support. Extended families, religious structures, and ethnic social systems latently encourage adaptive behavior (Masten & Powell, 2003; McCubbin & McCubbin, 2005).

Arroyo and Zigler (1995) studied the concept of "racelessness" proposed by Fordham (1988) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986), which suggested that Black students

who were academically successful distanced themselves from their own culture and adopted attitudes and behaviors of other cultures. The participants in these quantitative studies, 389 adolescents aged 13 – 20, completed a 51 item survey and a 33 item inventory to self-assess themselves in socially desirable manners. These researchers found that the turbulence of adolescence, combined with the difficult task of discovering a social role, is worsened by the psychological stresses of stereotyping of minority cultures, and the perception of "otherness" in a predominantly White society (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995).

Ungar (2008) explored culturally determined outcomes that might be associated with resilience. The Ungar mixed methods study focused on 1,500 students across 14 global sites to increase the chance of a culturally diverse sample. Each site had a coordinator, a researcher, and an advisory committee that was made up of people from the local area. A convenience sample of at least 60 participants at each global site was used. All participants completed the Children and Youth Resiliency Measure (CYRM) (Ungar, 2008). The CYRM was administered either individually or in a group setting depending upon what was culturally accepted. The CYRM included 58 items that were shared across sites and 15 questions that were site specific. The study identified three significant suggestions that contributed to the building of resiliency. First, facets of children's lives that contribute to resilience are related to one another in patterns that reflect a child's culture. Second, facets of resilience exert differing amounts of influence on a child's life depending on the specific culture in which resilience is realized. Lastly, facets of children's lives that contribute to resilience are related to one another in patterns that reflected a child's cultures. While the findings of the study were valid to the

researcher's inquiry, further studies on risk and resiliency must incorporate culture and diversity to address processes that promote resiliency (Arrington & Wilson, 2000).

Resiliency and Gender

The concept of gender in relation to building resilience can help adolescent girls view their world within context, rather than seeing themselves as personal failures (Johnson, 2001). Gender differences may be particularly important to consider since (a) based on traditional gender socialization practices, Latino parents socialize their girls, more than their boys, toward placing a greater importance on family relationships (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004) and (b) gender socialization pressures intensify during adolescence (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001). By examining the resilient qualities of at risk yet academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty, one may begin to understand how those resilient qualities are built and what environmental and familial factors promote resiliency.

Research has indicated female students, in particular, may be at risk of establishing negative self-concepts that may impact their ability to respond positively to the challenges faced as they continue to grow (Tiggemann & Williamson, 2000). In a study conducted by Bailey and Baines (2012), the researchers identified multiple socio-demographic factors as potential risks and further suggested that girls may also be at risk due to disruptions in their peer relations, coming from non-White ethnic backgrounds, living in poverty, or having English as a second language.

Bailey and Baines (2012) examined the effects of both risk and resilience factors on children transitioning from primary to secondary school. This study was different in that the research focused on risk and resilient factors together within one theoretical

framework. Students in year six in four different primary schools who were to transition into two different secondary schools were selected as participants. There were 133 participants between 10 and 11 years old. The researchers used a longitudinal, non-experimental design for the study. Data were collected from the students during the last half of year 6 in primary school and then again when one term of year 7 was completed at their new secondary school. The researchers collected data through the use of a student and teacher questionnaires pre and post transition and utilized the Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents (RSCA). The student questionnaire measured five aspects of school adjustment in the form of 27 questions that asked how strongly a statement applied to them on a five-point Likert scale. The teacher questionnaire ascertained teacher perspectives on students' risk and on resilience as well as adjustment to school; it contained 11 items on which teachers rated students on a five-point scale. The study found that an increased self-efficacy led to smoother transitions between grade levels. This research was important to the current study because the researcher also used the RSCA subscale of Relatedness.

In their study that focused on gender differences in harmful risk-taking and antisocial behavior, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) found that some girls who asserted their right to equality with their male significant others and refused to be categorized as "victims" became bullies or "bitch Barbies" (p. 138). Risk Activity by Personal Risk Assessment (RAPRA) and Personal Risk Score Category (PRISC) were used to collect data over a four-year period. Sixty-eight students in 11th and 12th grade were selected for participation in the study. Gender of the students was split evenly among the participants; the girls in the sample ranged in age from 13 – 17 with a median

age of 15. The participants completed a survey in which they rated the riskiness of each of the 26 listed risky behaviors on a 7-point scale. Subsequently the girls were asked to say how frequently they had participated in each activity — ranging from never, to yes, once; yes, occasionally; to yes, regularly. Findings indicated that the majority of the girls accepted the risks associated with the behavior, meaning girls were willing to participate in the activity despite the risk. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) supported Ungar's view that both risk taking and resilience are outcomes of the "negotiations between individuals and their environments" (Ungar, 2004, p. 342). Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli also adopted the position that resilience and the inhibition of harmful risk-taking activity reflect acquired social competencies as well as psychological predispositions (i. e., some risks are taken because there is a predisposition for the risk within the social network). This position taken by Martino and Pallorra-Chisrolli further supported Harvey and Delfabbro's (2004) claim that "previous experience clearly plays a role in the development of the skills and strategies that are required" (p. 5) because resilience refers to current functioning.

Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann (2010) focused on girls who grew up in poverty and the risks they faced. Girls in these communities were exposed to more violence than those in other communities and experienced the demoralizing effects of ever-present and constant harassment and the pressure to become sexually active at young ages (Popkin et al., 2010). Their research, mostly qualitative in nature, was conducted in Boston, Los Angeles, and New York with 122 families who received Section 8 assistance from the government. The researchers conducted 81 interviews in Boston, 120 in Los Angeles, and 75 in New York. Of those interviewed, 121 were

adolescents aged 14 – 18. The data from the adolescent responders were used to begin family-focused ethnographic studies in which they visited 39 subsets over a six to eight month time frame. The ethnographic sample included 18 adolescent girls and 21 adolescent males. The adolescent interview questions included topics such as dating, safety, and risky behavior. The adult questions included topics such as neighborhood environment, housing, health, education, and employment (Popkin et al., 2010). Results of the study indicated that girls began experiencing harassment and pressure during early adolescence, at age 12 or 13. Further results indicated that boys who lived in these communities had harsh attitudes (i.e. disrespectful or threatening) toward girls and women in general. The boys also thought that it was normal for men to have multiple sexual encounters and that it was acceptable to call women degrading names.

Castro and Landry's (2005) research on 12 to 17 year old Black and White adolescents found that witnessing violence in your neighborhood and being a victim of violence correlated to and significantly increased the likelihood of violent behavior among adolescents, regardless of gender, race, or class. The quantitative study on predictors of individual violence was based on 25 variables. Castro and Landry's (2005) research bridged the theory of intersectionality with general strain theory. Intersectionalists argue that race, gender, and class must be conceptualized as three socially constructed, interlocking systems of oppression that mutually support and define elements of one another (Collins, 1993). General strain theory suggests that anger generated by strain must be internalized or externalized (Castro & Landry, 2005). More specifically this study focused on the effects of neighborhood violence on individual violence.

Using an intersectional approach, Waldron (2011) focused on the nature of girl fighting and female aggression from the perspective of 31 students. Waldron focused on 14 girl participants who came from varied social and racial backgrounds, in an attempt to uncover how power and privilege affected students' understanding of female aggression. The data were collected through the use of interviews and observations at two high schools over a two-month period. The qualitative interviews began with open-ended questions that allowed students to talk broadly about their experiences growing up, going to school, and what they thought about their friends and fellow students. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours and were taped and transcribed. The researchers examined the meaning of girl fights and how sexuality, race, and social class gained significance as the girls talked about fighting. The findings indicated that girls tend to fight other girls largely to defend their sexual reputations or their connection to a boyfriend. Furthermore, it was also reported that the girls were not only physically aggressive towards others, as they also exhibited non-physical forms of violence such as name-calling or harassment. These nonphysical forms of violence and a disposition toward them developed as early as fifth grade and began to flourish in grade six (Waldron, 2011). The effects on academics were also discussed in the study. Aggression appeared to play a more significant role in later grades when some girls acted out because of a lack of interest in school subjects and/or school, and grades tended to decline due to suspension for aggressive behavior (Waldron, 2011).

Students who struggle academically are at further risk for the development of behavioral problems (Noam & Hermann, 2002). While boys and girls share many of the same risk factors for committing a criminal offense, these risk factors impacted boys and

girls differently (Dennis, 2012). Dennis (2012) conducted a study that examined risk factors that included experiencing loss of a loved one either through death or incarceration, caretaker neglect, physical or sexual abuse, running away, and other deviant street behaviors, such as prostitution. Using gender polarization as the framework for the study, the impact of the ideology of gender theory was tested in a survey given to two random samples of female students enrolled in a university in the state of New York. The frequency in which gender theory was promoted during adolescence was measured through 53 questions about middle childhood and adolescence. Topics included school performance, extracurricular activities, community activities, leisure interests, household chores, and actions and statements by parents and other adults (Dennis, 2012).

In 2010, The Girls Study Group of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention published a report on *Causes and Correlates of Girls' Delinquency* (Zahn, Agnew, Fishbein, Miller, Winn, Dakoff, & Chesney-Lind, 2010). This report indicated that girls had a higher risk of becoming delinquent if their academic performance was low. It also revealed that engaging in antisocial behavior had long-term negative consequences for girls that reached well into adulthood. Even if they stopped offending, women with a history of juvenile delinquency had poorer educational and employment outcomes than women who had no history of delinquency. All girls will not face delinquency; however, understanding how the risk factors and the resilient qualities interact is important to finding ways to help improve academic achievement. Several research studies have found that teaching problem-solving skills to early teens

ages 10 – 13 builds resiliency (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Spence, Sheffield, & Donovan, 2002; Washington, 2008).

The issue of academic motivation may compound academic achievement of at risk girls. Pomerantz and Raby (2011) challenged the masculine view that academically successful girls exist in a world "uncomplicated by gender or other intersecting identity categories, making their rise to the top appear straightforward, homogeneous, and uncomplicated by inequities" (p. 550). Pomerantz and Raby (2011) utilized focus groups and met with six girls between the ages of 15 and 17 who had academic averages of 80 or above. Their findings indicated that academic success was a potential avenue to economic and social freedom for girls, but it came at a price.

In addition to gender's role in delinquency and academic performance, consistent gender differences have emerged in children's and adolescents' beliefs about their abilities in certain content areas, specifically their beliefs about their abilities in math and science, their interest in math and science, and their perceptions of the importance of math and science for their futures. In general, researchers have found that girls and women had less confidence in their math abilities than boys and men do and that from early adolescence, girls showed less interest in math or science careers (Andre, Whigham, Hendrickson, & Chambers, 1999; Herbert & Stipek, 2005; Hyde & Mertz, 20009; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Simpkins, & Davis-Kean, 2005; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). McKown and Weinstein (2003) found that by age 10 or so, simply being evaluated on math and science concepts was enough to evoke stereotypes with respect to academically stigmatized ethnic minority students and female students. Their studies demonstrated that stereotypes could be a problem by the

time girls reached middle school. Reis and McCoach (2000) surmised that the beginning stages of underachievement occurred in elementary school.

Blue and Gann (2008) studied girls in grade 4 through grade 8 who were given surveys to answer questions about their interest in math and science. 439 fourth graders, 407 fifth graders, 344 sixth graders, 357 seventh graders, and 448 eighth graders were selected and completed the surveys. Of the 1,997 participants, 1,476 were from urban districts and 521 from rural districts in southwest Ohio. The researchers designed a purposefully short survey so that math and science were the only subjects surveyed, and feelings about school in general were not addressed. The results of this study indicated that by grade 7, girls had lost interest in math after a peak of interest in grade 5. The results further indicated that the mean of the girls' responses to the questions about math were lower each year beginning with grade 4. Girls seemed to have a high interest in science in grade 4 but by grade 5, the interest was significantly less (Blue & Gann, 2008). As a follow up to data collection, the researchers checked to see if there was a difference in the girls in urban districts when compared to girls in rural districts and found there were no significant differences between the groups at any grade (Blue & Gann, 2008).

Noam and Hermann (2002) suggested that gender played a role in the reason students dropped out of school. In conjunction with The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Shuger (2012) prepared a paper on early teen pregnancy and reported that nearly one-third of teen girls who had dropped out of high school cited early pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason. An estimated one in four female students will not graduate with a regular high school diploma in the standard, four-year time period (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). While not all girls will experience or be exposed to be

many of the educational barriers mentioned, it is important to understand how these barriers impact academic success.

Although some research has addressed risk factors across diverse racial groups and gender, less is known about risk factors specifically related to fifth grade academically successful girls living in poverty. However, research has identified living in poverty as a demographic risk factor for academic success (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2007).

Poverty and Resilience

One out of every four American children (14 million children) attended an urban district school (Haberman, 2005). The effects of family poverty are exacerbated when there is a high concentration of low-income families and individuals in a neighborhood (Simons, Simons, Conger, & Brody, 2004; Wilson, 1987).

In a position paper on resilience of Native American students, Thornton and Sánchez (2010) found that a larger percentage of Native American students lived below the poverty level and therefore faced more environmental risk than other demographics. The paper stated that these students were 66% more likely to be absent from school than other racial and ethnic populations. Another compelling item reported in the paper was that the dropout rate among Native American students does not have a consistent trend, but Native American students, especially girls, are more likely to drop out of schools than Whites (Thornton & Sánchez, 2010). This paper is important to this research as it centered on students living in poverty, a criterion for participation in the study.

Historically, children from poverty have been disproportionately placed at risk of academic failure (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). Bradley and Crowyn (2002) stated

that children who lived in poverty had less access to educational resources such as books, museums, libraries, theaters, and community educational centers than children who lived in higher socio-economic levels. Students from low socioeconomic areas, and students who are Hispanic or African American, are more likely to fail and drop out of school (Adam, 2004; Rodríguez 2013; Rodríguez 2014). Ladson-Billings (2012) has noted that children who lived in poverty are often exposed to inferior educational opportunities, an argument that corresponded with Gay's (2004) point of view:

And this redefinition of educational equality means affirming that problems or shortcomings in learning are not so much in shortcomings in ethnic minority students as in inequalities in the schools they attend. It also means refocusing schools toward being more responsive to human variability, spending less time manipulating ethnic students to make them comply to institutional structures, and instituting programs and processes that empower students through access to high-quality knowledge and experiences. (p. 231).

When educators have recognized the shortcomings mentioned in the aforementioned quote, they have sometimes struggled to understand how they can empower students through both instructional and personal connections (Milner, 2010). Leadbeater and Way (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of 114 girls who lived in poverty and followed them from middle childhood to young adulthood. The girls were ages 8 – 12 at the beginning of the study and between ages 28 – 34 at its conclusion. The study focused on academic achievement, social competence, and conduct. The results indicated that girls with higher self-efficacy, a caring adult, and higher intellectual functioning were the most resilient of the study participants. Conversely, girls who had

the absence of one or more of these characteristics became upset in adverse circumstances and succumbed to the pressure of handling the circumstance

Students who lived in poverty are more likely to be retained, suspended, and expelled from school (Rodríguez. 2014; Wood, 2003). Anthony (2008) examined the risk factors of 157 children in grades six through 8\eight who lived in poverty. Patterns of risk and protection as well as behavioral and educational outcomes were assessed. Participants were interviewed individually via an oral survey to ensure student comprehension and answers were recorded. The results of the study indicated that students were at higher risk when they possessed poor coping skills, had low self-efficacy, and limited caregiver presence. These factors when coupled with an impoverished environment increased the likelihood of school failure (Anthony, 2008).

Bronfenbrenner (1989), and later Spitler, Kemper, and Parker (2002), emphasized the influence of significant others on the developing person, defined as individuals in the micro-system who had the most immediate influence on the adolescent and therefore were most likely to impact adolescent's behaviors. In a practice guide for the United States Department of Education, Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash and Weaver (2008) found that children's behaviors were shaped by the expectations and examples provided by their peers and important adults in their lives. Kaylor and Flores (2007) studied the levels of hope of 47 girls in high school from culturally and linguistically diverse, socio-economically challenged environments. The study aimed to measure the girls' hopes for the future and utilized the Snyder's Children's Hope Scales (Kaylor & Flores, 2007). The girls were divided into two groups and received different levels of adult interaction. The Snyder Scales were administered before and after the girls were separated into

groups. There was not a great difference in the girls' hope for the future in either administration, however, the girls who received more support from a caring adult reported higher levels of effort toward academics (Kaylor & Flores, 2007).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to education in the United States and other nations. NCES data from the 2013 school year found that students from low-income families were six times more likely to drop-out than students from high-income families. DeJesús and Antrop-González (2006) analyzed the experiences of low-income students who attended two Latino community-based high schools. These researchers used ethnographic case studies to describe the school experience from the perspective of students, teachers, and other staff members. Successful students reported experiencing high expectations from educators and quality interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (DeJesús & Antrop-González, 2006).

Resiliency and School

Beyond the individual characteristics of resilient children, researchers began to pay more attention to understanding how schools affected students' academic resiliency. There is a large and growing body of evidence on the tremendous impact teachers can have on students' quality of life, including affecting whether students engage in harmful behaviors and affecting their emotional health and resilience (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002; Rodríguez, 2008; Rose, 2012; Wigfield, 1994). Positive teacher-student relationships were also cited as a significant contributor to academic achievement and motivation (Rutter, 1987) and the prevention of dropouts (Schoon, 2006), bullying

(Osburn, 1990), substance abuse (Wigfield, 1994), and violence (O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002).

Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova (2008) conducted a five-year longitudinal interdisciplinary and comparative study on immigrant adaptation that utilized mixed-methods. While a specific hypothesis was not stated, the researchers endeavored to understand and explain the experiences of immigrants over time, including students' academic performance in school.

The participants in the Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) study were born in Central America, China, Dominican Republic, Haiti, or Mexico, had parents who were of the same country, and spoke a native language other than English upon arrival to the United States. At the beginning of their study, 407 students between the ages of nine and fourteen were included from 51 schools in seven school districts. During the first year of the study, ethnographic participant observations and participant interviews were conducted. During the second year of the study, further ethnographic participant observations were conducted. At the end of the time span of their study, 309 students remained in the study.

The researchers utilized charts that categorized percentages as a means of reporting data. Direct quotations from participants, parents, and teachers were used throughout the results and conclusions reported. Data showed that the role of behavioral engagement, English language proficiency, having two parental figures in the home, maternal education, and whether the father was employed had a direct, positive correlation to grades (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). English language proficiency levels and behavioral engagement were the most robust predictors of grade point average

(GPA); they found that students who possessed stronger English skills were more likely to earn better grades and have higher GPAs

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) also reported that the grade point averages of two thirds of the participants declined and they also experienced a decline in their academic performance during the five years. As a result of their data analysis, five performance pathways emerged. The students were characterized as: "those students who were consistently high performers 'high achievers'; those students who were consistently low performers 'low achievers'; those students whose GPA slowly drifts downward across time 'slow decliners'; those students whose grades fall off precipitously 'precipitous decliners'; and lastly, those students whose grades improve over time 'improvers'" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008, p. 35). The high achievers or 22.5% of the students maintained an average GPA of 3.5 across the five years of the study. The researchers also found that girls were significantly more likely to be high achievers when compared to boys.

Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008) added credence to this researcher's belief that risk factors influence students' academic performance, particularly beyond fifth grade. Their study, however, did not gather and analyze the data in relation to students' perceptions on academic success while living in poverty and was focused on the middle and upper grades.

Rudasill (2011) examined students in first and third grade to determine connectedness with teachers and the affect or quality of the connectedness. The study was grounded in two theories: the Transactional Model of Development, which stated that the individual affected the environment and the environment affected the individual

in turn, and the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition, which stated that children's interactions with teachers are important for their successful transition to formal schooling (Rudasill, 2011). Over 1200 four and a half year-old participants were randomly selected to be in the study; there were slightly more girls than boys in the study. Data was collected at the onset of the study and again at first grade and third grade. Data from the Children's Behavior Questionnaire as administered by parents was used as this questionnaire measures the temperament of children aged 3 – 8 years. Additional data were gathered through the use of classroom observations in the first and third grade school years as well as through the use of surveys distributed to teachers in the spring of the respective school year. Results indicated that more negative affect in a teacher's narrative about a child was related to more frequent interactions with that child, and concluded that teachers' perceptions of children were closely tied to their behaviors toward those children. Findings supported the notion that children's early teacher student relationships had implications for later student teacher relationships. As such, efforts should be made to train pre-service and practicing teachers about the importance of high quality teacher student relationships for children's positive academic social outcomes (Rudasill, 2011).

Studies have shown that students who have established a relationship with their teacher are less likely to be retained and experience longer terms of academic achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Harvey (2007) examined schools with administrative staff that fostered resiliency. The premise of the paper was centered on a middle school principal in a highly impoverished area. Students were interviewed to ascertain what had made the difference from middle school to high

school grades and their overall perception of school. Interview results indicated that the principal had made the most difference because students believed him when he told them they could be anything they decided to become. Harvey (2007) also determined that adolescents' resilience is fostered when their teachers, school administrators, and parents have positive relationships with one another.

Some students have used personal, resilient qualities to combat the environmental risk factors they faced and have become "academically invulnerable", a term used by Alva (1991) to describe those students who "sustained high levels of achievement, motivation and performance, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that placed them at risk of doing poorly in school" (p. 19). To that end, high poverty schools have less qualified teachers and fewer opportunities for students to access high-powered curriculum and become academically successful (Harvey, 2007).

Poverty coupled with motivational factors, behavioral factors, and cultural factors increase the risks of young girls becoming academically vulnerable (Alva, 1991). Despite these risks, some young girls exhibit resiliency and thrive academically. Because not all girls will experience all risk factors associated with being academically unsuccessful nor will they experience them simultaneously, it is important to view resiliency as a process and not just an event or a fixed variable. While the nature or intensity of the individual risks may vary, the aggregation of multiple risk factors can lead to an increased likelihood of poor academic and life success (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). The resilience of girls and their ability to find alternative narratives to inspire them to persevere are qualities worthy of study.

Resilience research as a genre thus far has aimed to gain an understanding of why some individuals are able to overcome risk and adverse conditions when others are not. This genre of research has also identified a number of environmental variables that place girls at risk as well as factors that help foster resilience. While this genre has helped to identify protective factors that build resiliency, the effects of multiple risk factors on the academically successful resilient girl have yet to be studied in depth.

In summary, several researchers have focused on risk factors in girls and resilience; however, there were no studies that identified risk factors in at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty yet being academically successful as a group. This study explored the possible risk factors that academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty encounter. This study serves as an aid in the identification and educational service delivery to students who may be at risk for academic and behavioral school failure when considering both the risk factors that lead to negative outcomes and the student characteristics and environments that may offset some of the life environments to which students may be exposed. This study is an important addition to the research.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter details the research methodology, which includes the research design, participants, and procedures used to collect and analyze the data. This descriptive case study attempted to identify resilient qualities in academically successful at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty as well as the effect family had on resiliency. Specifically, this study was guided by the following questions: (1) what protective factors contribute to resiliency in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty; and (2) what effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls? This inquiry is significant because resilience may play a major role in minimizing the effects of negative events in the lives of youth within school settings (Brackenreed, 2010).

The resiliency process is a life-enriching model that suggests that life stressors provide growth and increased resilient qualities or protective factors (Richardson, 2002). A constructivist paradigm was employed to gain a clear understanding of this phenomenon. Constructivists aim to gain an understanding of broad concepts, such as cultural values, through the reconstruction of constructs that people hold in hopes of gaining a consensus view (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are two constructivist designs, one of which focuses on individual, personal constructs, and the other of which focuses on shared or social constructs (Williamson, 2006). In this case study, the focus was on personal construction as it was the individual girl's resilient qualities that were analyzed and discussed. In addition, operating from a constructivist paradigm allowed the

researcher to understand each girl from her own perspective while also recognizing and acknowledging the researcher's background as it influenced the interpretation of data (Williamson, 2006). Therefore, it is vital that I am explicit about the lens that I brought to the study. As a researcher with a similar experience to the girls in the study, I thought it is important that I explain my choice in study topic as well as population.

As a formerly identified at risk girl, I know my experience and what factors helped shape me to become academically successful. As an educator, I believe that it is important for today's at risk girls to have a voice in what shapes them both academically and personally. Their resilience and ability to find alternatives to inspire them and to persevere are qualities worthy of study. Drawing from their experience, my goal was to access traits that can be instilled in others, and therefore create more successful at risk girls.

Researcher's Voice

The use of the constructivist paradigm allowed for me, the researcher, to serve as both participant and observer (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My interest in at risk girls and the traits that build resiliency stem from my school experience of being labeled an at risk girl. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical data examining pre-adolescent at risk girls who are academically successful.

I spent my early childhood in a nontraditional home; I lived with my maternal grandmother, and my mother sometimes slept there. We were rich in love and perhaps what people would consider money poor. However, I never lacked the things I needed on a daily basis. My grandmother instilled in me the value of education at an early age, as she completed her bachelor's degree when I was three. This soft-spoken woman, who

after raising six children and now her granddaughter, went back to college to complete a degree. My grandmother became a special education teacher and to this day she is my role model.

School has always been the one place I felt comfortable. Although my peers chastised me for reading at recess, school was a safe haven for me. My teachers did not seem to know what to do with me because I finished work rapidly and drifted to the corner to read. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Punch, was the first teacher to tell me that I was gifted. She had my grandmother sign paperwork for me to be tested and placed into the Vanguard Program at a school outside of our neighborhood.

It was not until I arrived at River Oaks Elementary School that I realized that schools were different. I was offered music lessons, foreign language, and art, in addition to all of the core subjects; whereas, in my old school we did core subjects and recess. It was in this Vanguard environment that I began to flourish but also this was where I heard the term at risk for the first time. I was labeled at risk because of my familial economic status – economically disadvantaged.

I could not control that label but as a teenager, I added to my at risk status by becoming a teen mom during high school. As such, I became another girl who fit the stereotypical model of girls from my neighborhood who were more likely to become pregnant than graduate high school. Yet with my grandmother's assistance, I did not fall victim to my circumstances. Despite having a child. I became a National Merit Scholar and college was again a reality.

Here I am, many years later, still using school as an escape. Yet now, I am more than an at risk youth. I am a mother, a wife, an educator, an emerging scholar, and dare I

say an advocate for equal education. Without question, there is a level of empathy that connected me to the girls in my study. I am from an impoverished area and at times identify directly with statements made by the girls in the study. However, there were limitations to my participant status as I did not share the same understanding or personal history of how the girls dealt with adversity in their own lives and fostered resiliency. Furthermore, it was each participant's voice that informed me and defined what resiliency looked like against the backdrop of shifting cultural dynamics (Hall, 2007).

Methods

Research Design

Using qualitative methods, the researcher examined the factors that assisted in the building of resiliency in academically successful at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty. Qualitative inquiry, and specifically the constructivist paradigm, embraces the concept that "there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 4). According to Creswell (1994; 2007), qualitative research is defined as an inquiry process to understand a social or human problem. The research should present a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. Gall, Gall, and Borg, (2007) suggested that qualitative methods are useful when the research question concerns process. Process includes how something has happened, meanings, personal responses, values or other factors requiring depth or detailed information. The goal of this study was to identify factors that assisted in building resiliency that positively impacted academic achievement in young girls living in poverty with an aim to describe a unique phenomenon, resiliency building, in the real-life context of young at risk girls

living in poverty (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Descriptive case study is appropriate for describing a unique phenomenon in the real-life context in which it occurs (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hence, it was ideal for this study because the researcher defined the uniqueness of this phenomenon – resiliency that distinguishes it from all others (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Research Setting

The participants in this study were fifth grade girls who attended a school located in a large urban school district in west Texas. The district was the largest in its region and the area's biggest employer. The participants' school was situated in a low income area. Within the community, the high school dropout rate of 3.1% was higher than the state average of 2.4%, and the median income was less than that of the state. Further, there was a high mobility rate and most dwellings are apartment homes, which typically house multiple families.

The districts' student population for the 2012 – 2013 academic year was composed of 4.1% African American, 10.6% White, 82.6% Hispanic, 0.2% American Indian, and 2.6% Asian/Pacific Islander and students of two or more races. The percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged during the 2012 – 2013 academic year was 69.7%. The demographics of the school district revealed a district with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged families, which is an integral part of the study as it was one of the criteria for participation in this study.

The school demographics differed slightly from the district demographics, as there was a lower percentage of African American students and a higher percentage of Hispanic students. There was also a lower percentage of White students. The number of

economically disadvantaged families for the district and the number of economically

disadvantaged families for the school illustrate a considerable difference in percentage

(21.1%) with the school having the higher percentage. The demographics of the district

and school are found in Table 1. This school was selected as the field site because of ease,

access, and demographic characteristics. Thus, convenient sampling was used to recruit

participants.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Students 2012 – 2013

Racial/Ethnic Percentage

	African American	Hispanic	White	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander/two or more races	Economically Disadvantaged
District	4.1%	82.6%	10.6%	0.2%	2.6%	69.7%
School	0.3%	98.3%	1.4%	0%	0%	90.8%

Source: Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), 2013

Participant Selection

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select the student participants for the

study. Using purposeful sampling allowed the data to be interrogated purposefully so that

systematic comparisons could be made (Barbour, 2008). Therefore, the participants

needed to possess certain characteristics to take part in the focus group sessions. The

study participants met the following criteria: (a) were enrolled at the campus selected for

data collection, (b) were female, (c) were in fifth grade, (d) were identified as at risk in

the campus PEIMS, (e) had a current grade average of B or higher at the time of sampling,

(f) had met the standard on the STAAR test in third and fourth grades, and (g) had an

average or above score on the RSCA. In addition, the campus' PEIMS clerk assisted the researcher in collecting student academic histories to ensure that all potential participants had been identified.

Fifth grade at risk girls were chosen, first, because the grade level corresponded to the culmination of the elementary years and a transition into middle school and adolescence, and the typical characteristics of adolescence begin to emerge during this time. Second, in subsequent years, other risk factors such as pregnancy or attendance may pose barriers that negatively impact resiliency and the research design. Lastly, the researcher was concerned with addressing at risk girls during the time when most parents are still actively involved in their children's education. The ability of the girls to be academically successful in their core classes as well as on state mandated tests is a direct contradiction of the label at risk. The girls were labeled at risk of not graduating high school but, in fact, might have been outperforming some of their non-labeled peers.

Data Collection

The researcher used the Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents to collect resiliency data prior to the focus group. The scales assessed the personal attribute of resiliency and are comprised of three core developmental factors of personal experience: Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness, and Emotional Reactivity (Prince-Embury, 2007). The RSCA examines children's perceptions of the personal resources that are available to them for coping with adverse events.

The researcher distributed one hundred RSCA profiles to fifth grade students and thirty were returned. Once the RSCA profiles were collected the researcher determined the resilience score of each. Once the resilience scores were ascertained six girls were

identified to have scores within the average to above average range of resiliency. Range of scores can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Score Rankings Based on Resiliency Scale T Score Ranges

Ranking	T score Range
High	≥ 60
Above Average	$56 - 59$
Average	$46 - 55$
Below Average	$41 - 45$
Low	≤ 40

 The academic histories of these six girls were then examined to see if they met the additional criteria. Five of the six girls met the other study criteria and were verified as participants in the study.

The researcher served as the focus group moderator and used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct the focus group discussions. The researcher gave all student participants an opportunity for equal participation in the focus group discussions. The researcher also used a field notebook to record notes throughout the study.

A digital voice recorder was used to record the focus group discussions. The researcher transcribed the digital voice recordings within 72 hours of the end of the focus group meeting. The researcher used the transcript to create a spreadsheet to code the transcribed conversations and their themes.

Instrumentation. To measure resiliency, the RSCA was administered to all fifth grade girls. This instrument helped the researcher identify those girls who were asked to

participate in the focus group sessions. Those girls with the highest scores were identified and their academic records were examined to determine if all other criteria had been met for participation.

The RSCA is a group of self reporting scales written at a third grade reading level for children aged 9 to 18. The scales measure sense of mastery, sense of relatedness, and emotional reactivity. The total raw score is determined by summing all item sums for each scale. Raw scores are then transformed to standardized T-scores using computed means and standard deviations for normative groups (based on age and gender). T-scores allow for profiling across scales (Prince-Embury, 2007).

The RSCA provides an assessment of the personal attribute of resiliency and is comprised of three core developmental factors of personal experience: Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness, and Emotional Reactivity (Prince-Embury, 2007). The RSCA examines children's perceptions of the personal resources that are available to them for coping with adverse events. The full measure includes 64 Likert-type items and yields two Index scores: Resource and Vulnerability (Prince-Embury, 2007). This measure, although quantitative in nature, was used as one of the criteria for selection of the five participants upon whom this case study was built.

The Sense of Mastery Scale (MAS), which includes optimism, self-efficacy, and adaptability, was administered in this study. The MAS scale includes 20 items in which participants rated themselves on a 5-point scale (0=Never to 4=Almost Always). While the subscale had a high degree of reliability with a Cronbach Alpha of 0.85 (α = .85), each subscale has varying reliability (Prince-Embury, 2007) as shown in Table 3. For this

study, the optimism and self-efficacy subscales were used to measure self-efficacy beliefs and are designated with an asterisk in Table 3.

The Sense of Relatedness Scale (REL) includes 24 items in which participants rated themselves on a 5-point scale (0=Never to 4=Almost Always) on their trust, support, comfort, and tolerance. While the subscale had a high degree of reliability with a Cronbach Alpha of 0.89 ($\alpha = .89$), the subscales have varying reliability (Prince-Embury, 2007) as shown in Table 3. For this study, the support subscale was used to measure perceived access to support (i.e., family) as designated with an asterisk in Table 3.

The Emotional Reactivity Scale (REA) includes 20 items in which participants rated themselves on a 5-point scale (o=Never to 4=Almost Always) and assessed their sensitivity, recovery, and impairment. Lower scores on the Emotional Reactivity suggest the presence of resilience and high scores suggest the presence of vulnerability. For this study, the recovery subscale was used to measure the perceived ability to bounce back from an emotional disturbance (i.e. life stressor) as designated with an asterisk in Table 3.

Table 3

Alpha Coefficients for RSCA Global Scale and Subscale Scores and Index Score Reliability Estimates[a] for Child and Adolescent Normative Samples Across Age-Band

RSCA Subscales	9–11
*Optimism	.69
*Self-Efficacy	.77
Adaptability	.56
Trust	.78
*Access to Support	.71
Social Comfort	.76
Tolerance	.68
Sensitivity	.75
*Recovery	.83

Impairment	.88
RSCA Scales	
Sense of Mastery	.85
Sense of Relatedness	.89
Emotional Reactivity	.90
RSCA Index Scores[a]	
Resource Index	.93
Vulnerability Index	.93

Note: Alpha coefficients for nonclinical samples from the RSCA manual (Prince-Embury, 2007). [a]The composite score reliability estimate calculation is described in the RSCA manual (Prince-Embury, 2007).

Focus groups. Three focus group meetings were held, and a total of 5 students participated. When doing focus group research, it is important that group members share at least one important characteristic since the group will be the main unit of analysis (Barbour, 2008). Also, the researcher intended for the focus groups to be homogeneous in terms of background (i.e., all were living in poverty) and not attitudes (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The characteristics that the focus group participants shared were their gender, grade level, status as at risk, and academic success.

A focus group is a group of individuals brought together for an open-ended discussion about an issue (Creswell, 2009), that is of interest to participants and the researcher (Pomrenke, 2007). Researchers must carefully moderate discussion to make sure a particular group member does not dominate the conversation and must take steps to draw out less vocal members of the group (Creswell, 2007). For the purpose of the first focus group, the researcher used questions to probe the participants and illicit responses. All focus group sessions were audio-recorded using a digital recording device and were transcribed. A detailed description of the focus group sessions can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Focus Group Session Descriptor

Session Number	Topic of Discussion	Number of Participants	Length	Description of Session
1	Academic Success	5	95 minutes	During this session, the girls were able to discuss what they believe makes them academically successful; what their favorite subjects were; and who helped them to be successful. The researcher asked 2 engagement questions, 6 questions related specifically to the study, and 1 exit question.
2	Follow-up questions and clarifications	5	64 minutes	During this session, the girls were asked to provide points of clarity on themes that emerged during the transcription of the first session. The girls were given the choice of also responding in writing specifically to the question – From whom do you seek help from?
3	Member check	5	30 minutes	During this session, the girls were given the opportunity to read a brief summary of their characteristics and how the researcher viewed them in terms of their academic success and resilience. The girls were asked to initial the summary if they agreed to its depiction. If there was disagreement, the researcher spoke with the participant and made adjustments/corrections until the participant initialed the summary.

As this was a convenience sample, the girls sometimes sought out the researcher to ask for advice or to ask when the group would meet again. These brief encounters were not recorded and were not counted in the time that the researcher spent with the focus group participants.

Environment. A permissive environment allows students to share their perceptions and points of views without feeling pressured to answer in a certain way (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researcher created a non-judgmental environment for the students in the focus group and provided conditions needed for free and open sharing. The researcher listened carefully to participants, observed how they answered, and sought clarification on areas of ambiguity. Moreover, the focus group interviews were conducted at the girls' school in the literacy lab.

Researcher's field notebook. To collect data that could not be digitally recorded, the researcher utilized a field notebook. Field notes are notes of observations or conversation taken during data collection (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). The field notebook contains entries on participants' body language, facial expressions, and other brief notations to be elaborated on later (Bryman & Bell, 2003). In the field notebook, the researcher drew models of where participants sat and made notations of comments and facial expressions of the participants as they answered each question. These notations were used at the end of the focus group discussions, so the participants could verify the comments.

After the focus group meetings, the researcher used the time immediately following the focus group meetings to check the digital voice recordings. Also, the researcher reflected on the following questions:

1. What were the most important themes or ideas discussed?

2. How did these differ from what I expected?

3. What points needed to be included in the findings?

4. What quotes should be remembered?

5. Were there any unexpected or unanticipated findings?

All items (e.g., field notes, and other materials) from the discussions were labeled and stored. Following the completion of this study, all data were safeguarded and destroyed in accordance with the CPHS guidelines as outlined therein.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using the constant comparative method which required the researcher to take data (i.e., a statement) and compare it to all other pieces of data that were similar or different. When using focus group data, analysis of themes begins with the first focus group and continues after the focus group ends (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, and the research plan focused and refined categories to delineate themes.

Systematic Analysis

First, the researcher designed the sequence of the focus group questions to ascertain the greatest amount of insight. Therefore, participants were allowed to become familiar with the topic, given an opportunity to recollect personal experiences, and listen to others' experiences. Second, the data were collected and handled in a systematic way. The researcher created a file for each participant labeled with her pseudonym. These files contained every piece of data collected from each individual participant and allowied the researcher access to data at all times. The researcher also recorded the focus group

sessions and kept field notes in order to reconstruct crucial parts of the discussions. Third, once data were collected, the researcher coded them. After multiple readings of the transcripts, the researcher labeled ideas or themes each time they emerged or appeared. A spreadsheet was used to code and store the transcribed data in themes. Fourth, the researcher verified key points with the girls to ensure that the intent of each participant was adequately understood. This verification was done through member checking during the third and final focus group session. Table 5 details the correlation of the research questions to the questions asked during the focus group.

Table 5

Correlating Research and Focus Group Question Guide

Research Questions	Focus Group Questions
What protective factors contribute to resiliency in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?	Q5. – Describe any obstacles (challenges/difficulties) you've faced growing up so far? Q6. – How did these challenges (obstacles/difficulties) make school more difficult for you? Q7. - Think back to the first time you faced a challenge (obstacle/difficulty) in your life. What kinds of changes have you made since then to remain successful in school?
What effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?	Q2. – Who has influenced your view of school? (How has that view shaped your perception of your success?) Q3. – Who in your family do you speak with to help you handle setbacks and disappointments (academic or other)?

Transcript-Based Analysis

The researcher identified emergent themes by listening to the transcripts of the focus group sessions, using field notes, and reviewing post-focus group notes. The

researcher applied the constant comparative method to compare the views and experiences of the participants. Using the constant comparative method allowed subtle but potentially important differences to be illuminated (Barbour, 2008). Also, the researcher analyzed the discussions for inconsistencies and contradictions to identify the opinions, ideas, or feelings that were repeated.

After reaching the point of saturation, themes were analyzed within the context of the research questions. The researcher searched for themes unique to particular girls as well as themes that connected all the girls (Creswell, 2009). These findings are presented in a narrative description of each participant followed by a presentation of a collective case in chapter four.

Validity: For the purposes of this study, triangulation was achieved using digitally recorded focus group transcripts, the researcher's field notes, and member checks. Throughout the study, precautions were taken to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data collected (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Validity was established through the use of member checks in which participants verified the accuracy of the researcher's case summary of their experiences. The data from varied sources, (i.e. focus groups and researcher's field notes), were triangulated to provide support for emerging themes. Disconfirming evidence was reanalyzed to determine if codes or themes were overlooked. Finally, peer debriefing of the data and analysis by experts in the field provided another means of ensuring validity. Two experts engaged in the peer debriefing process. Both peers were in agreement with the coding process. The researcher established interrater reliability by providing experts in the field with a portion of transcript and asking them to code it using the established codes.

Limitations

As with most studies, limitations had to be addressed. These limitations impacted the overall findings but more importantly, they limited the degree to which the findings can be generalized to a larger population. Within the case study context, researchers typically select a limited number of cases and collect multiple forms of data to provide an in-depth analysis of the cases. Because this study was qualitative in nature and qualitative approaches typically involve a smaller sample size, it is within range to have only 5 participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Additionally, availability of an at risk academically successful fifth grade girl population limited the number of participants for this study. The researcher sought a population of five girls with which to create a single focus group. The researcher administered the RSCA to the school's entire fifth grade population so as not to target a special population within the school setting. Based on student scores on this measure and coupled with academic histories, the researcher selected the girls to participate in this case study. The timeline for data collection and analysis is reflected in Table 6.

Table 6

Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis

Month	Participant Activities	Researcher Activities
Nov 2014		• Administered RSCA
		• Finalized focus group participants
Nov 7, 2014	• Focus group session	• Transcribed data from initial focus group
Nov 8 – Dec 14, 2014		• Began initial coding of

		data from focus group
		• Continued coding of data from focus group
Dec 17, 2014	• Follow-up focus group	• Transcribed data from focus group
Dec 18, 2014		• Began initial coding of data from focus group
Dec 19, 2014 – Jan 11, 2015		• Continued coding of data from focus group
Jan 12 – May 7, 2015		• Continued data analysis and coding
May 8, 2015	• Member check	
July 15, 2015		• Experts in field performed coding

The qualitative nature of this study, coupled with the constructed view of reality (Williamson, 2006), resulted in this study being specific only to the five participants. Thus, these data are not generalizable. However, the purpose was to gain a better understanding of the factors that build resiliency rather than determine the applicability of resiliency to all fifth grade at risk yet academically successful girls living in poverty. Also, the data used to classify whether children were at risk was administrative at the specific campus site, and may have excluded children who may have been eligible to participate in this study. Additionally, the inclusion of only fifth grade girls also limited this study, as it is possible that there were other students who exhibited resiliency in other

grades. Moreover, the concept resiliency was used throughout the research literature as a possible explanation for the consistent findings that some children excel while other socio-economically similar children continue to remain behind their same-aged peers. Categorizing children as resilient without examining all aspects of their environment that could impact them (i.e., focusing solely on children who live in poverty without taking into consideration other factors such as parent level of education) is an issue of concern.

Lastly, the study relied on academic records that illustrated academic success, which unfortunately were biased by the context. Noted scholar, Ladson-Billings (2012), stated that children living in poverty are often exposed to inferior educational opportunities. As such, academically successful children in this context may not be academically successful in other contexts or as compared to their middle or upper class peers.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher took several steps to safeguard the participants in the study. Formal permission to conduct the study was obtained from the district's Research and Evaluation Office and the University of Houston–Clear Lake (UHCL) Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS). The researcher also sought parental permission and student assent from participating students prior to the administration of the RSCA. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant prior to the administration of the RSCA and used throughout the collection and analysis of data. All data were stored on the researcher's password protected devices. Upon completion of the study, all data was destroyed in accordance with the CPHS guidelines as outlined therein.

Implications

This study explored the factors that promoted the building of resiliency in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls by examining girls who demonstrated academic success despite cultural and familial stressors. To raise teacher awareness of these factors, this study intended to provide information on how teachers and other school personnel can deal more effectively with at risk girls by supporting and enhancing academic resilience and promoting resiliency building in the school environment.

Implications from the current study may include teacher development in the fostering of resilience in students who underperform in the classroom. Other implications include aspects inherent in the student teacher relationship and interactions that naturally foster resilience. Teaching practices informed by these results can begin by focusing at the teacher preparation level.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter, the researcher provides an account of the study results. This chapter presents the findings from the focus group sessions as they relate to the two research questions that guided this study:

1. What protective factors contribute to resilience in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

2. What effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

The chapter consists of two main sections: 1) a summary of the group dynamic and individual participant profiles which were created to introduce the girls who shared their personal experiences and aided in this study and 2) collective case studies as they emerged from the data analysis of the participants' responses to the key research questions.

Summary of Group Characteristics

This section presents more details regarding the characteristics of the group dynamic of the girls in the study. All the girls met the following criteria for inclusion in the study: a) enrolled at the campus selected for data collection; b) female; c) fifth graders; d) identified as at risk in the campus Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS); e) had a minimum grade average of B; f) had met the standard on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test in the two previous grades; and g) had an average or above score on the Resilience Scales for Children and Adolescents (RSCA). Academic profiles and the RSCA provided background

information and aided the analysis of the data collected during the focus group sessions.

To illustrate a comparison of the girls, characteristics of the focus group participants are

shown in Table 7

Table 7

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Participant Name	Grade Average	RSCA Score	Favorite Subject	At risk code	Ethnicity
Ashley	87	64.5	Math	LEP	Hispanic
Jessika	88	62.5	Science	Readiness	White
Emily	85	54	Science	Readiness	White
Autumn	88	53.5	Reading	LEP	Hispanic
Aubree	91	52	Math	LEP	Hispanic

Resiliency Scale profile comparison can be found in Figure 2. This figure

illustrates a comparison of the girls' overall scores across the scales that comprise the

RSCA. A specific breakdown of theses scores and their subsequent subscales is detailed

in the student participant profiles.

Figure 2

Resilience Scale Profiles for Ashley, Aubree, Autumn, Emily, and Jessika
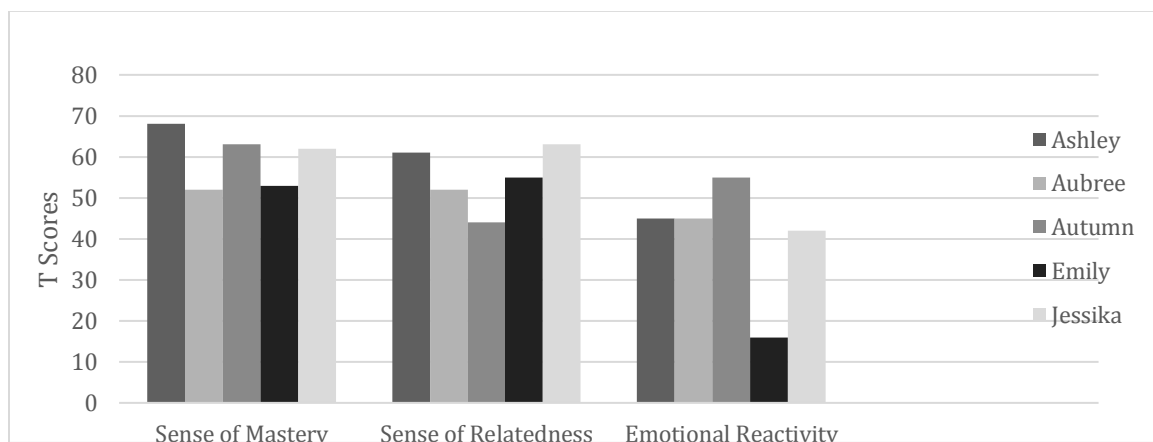
Student Participant Profiles

As a result of the in-depth focus group sessions and the use of a field notebook, the following student profiles of the at risk girls living in poverty who were academically successful in school were created. The profiles are a brief introduction to the participating girls and provide brief pictures of who they were. The girls selected their pseudonyms during the focus group session. Some of the names were spur of the moment choices while others held some significance to the girls who chose them. Many of the names the girls selected were similar to their real names, which made identification easy. To further protect the identity of each girl, the researcher created fictitious names to replace the participants' focus group session names.

Ashley was an 11-year-old fifth grader who lives with her mom, little sister, and two older brothers. Her parents were undergoing a divorce but she had a close relationship with her father. Ashley had been at the school since Pre-Kindergarten and was an English language learner. She had an overall grade average of 87 with the highest of her grades being in English Language Arts. She had an RSCA score of 64.5, which fell in the high range of T-scores for overall resiliency; Ashley had the highest resiliency score of all the focus group participants. During the focus group session, she spoke freely about her experiences and seemed to really enjoy the opportunity to share her story and listen to other girls' experiences.

Ashley's RSCA profile reported a high Sense of Mastery and Sense of Relatedness. Her level of Emotional Reactivity was average. Figure 3 illustrates a subscale profile for Ashley as it related to her Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness and Emotional Reactivity.

Figure 3

Subscale Profile for Ashley

Ashley's subscale scores indicated that although overall she has a high Sense of Mastery, she had an average sense of optimism and adaptability. However, Ashley had an above average sense of self efficacy, a high Sense of Relatedness and her trust, support, and comfort were above average. She had an average level of tolerance and an overall average Emotional Reactivity. The subscales indicated that she had a below average sense of sensitivity and recovery but an average sense of impairment.

Jessika was an 11-year-old fifth grader living with her mother and father and was an only child. She had been at the school only since third grade and this was her fourth elementary school. She had an overall grade average of 88 with the highest of her grades being in science. Her RSCA score of 62.5 fell in the high range of T-scores for overall resiliency. During the focus group, she was reflective and at times was truly passionate when sharing her perspective. She was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease while participating in the focus group. Jessika dreamed of becoming a physicist.

Jessika's RSCA profile reported a high Sense of Mastery as well as Sense of Relatedness and a below average Emotional Reactivity. Figure 4 illustrates a subscale profile for Jessika as it related to her Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness and Emotional Reactivity.

Figure 4

Subscale Profile for Jessika
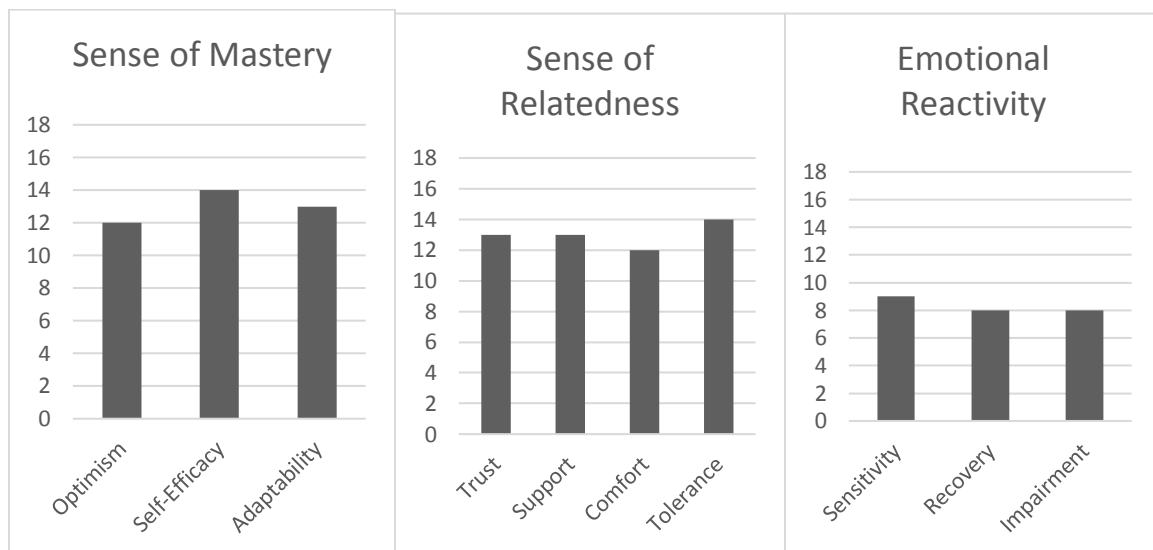
Jessika's Sense of Mastery subscale scores indicated that she had average optimism, above average self-efficacy, and above average adaptability. Of her average scores, Jessika's self-efficacy score was the highest. Jessika's Sense of Relatedness subscale scores reported that she had above average trust, support, comfort, and tolerance. Of all the girls in the focus group Jessika had the highest Sense of Relatedness score. Jessika's Emotional Reactivity subscale scores indicated that she had average sensitivity, recovery, and impairment.

Emily was an 11-year-old fifth grader who lived with her mother, father, and older brother. She had attended the school since Pre-Kindergarten. She had an overall grade average of 85 with the highest of her grades being in math. She had an RSCA score

of 54 that fell in the average range of T-scores for overall resiliency. During the focus group session, she was attentive and eager to share her ideas, even though she sometimes had difficulty expressing herself orally because she had a tendency to take extended time to think about what was being asked. She usually added to an answer rather than being the first to comment.

Emily's RSCA profile reported an average Sense of Mastery and Sense of Relatedness. Her level of Emotional Reactivity was low. Emily's profile had a steeper decline than others indicating that there may have been a discrepancy between her ability to express emotional reactivity and her access to personal resources. Figure 5 illustrates a subscale profile for Emily as it related to her Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness and Emotional Reactivity.
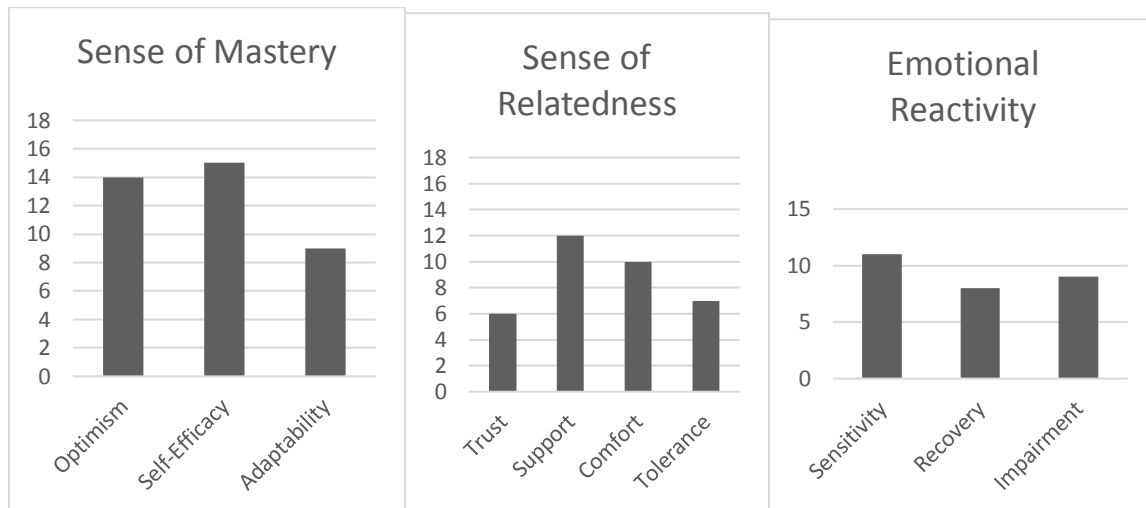
Figure 5

Subscale Profile for Emily
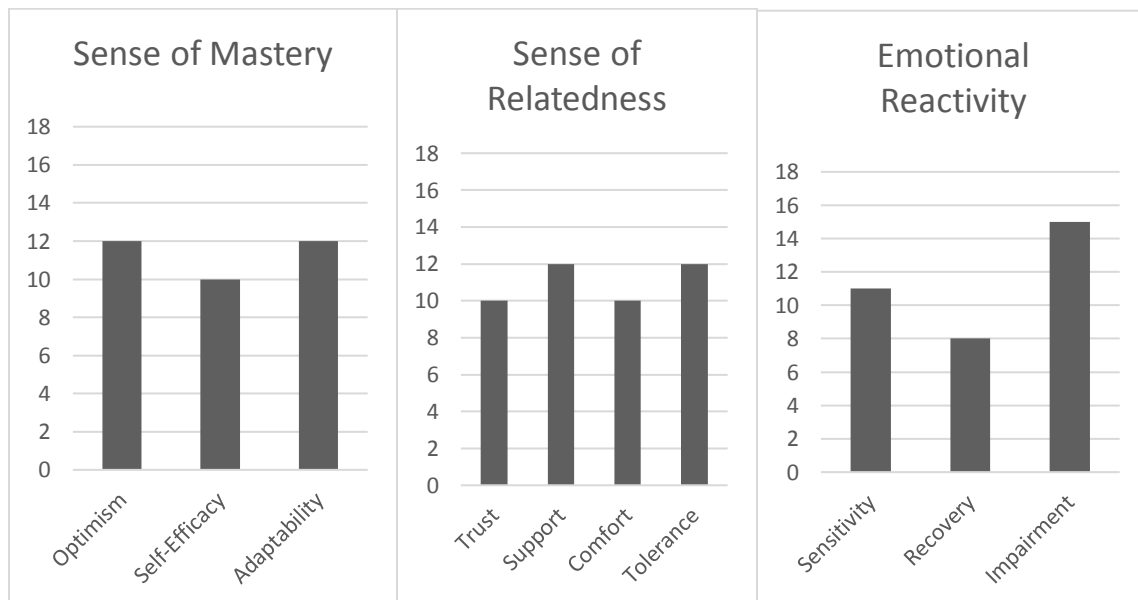
Emily's Sense of Mastery subscale scores indicated that she had an average sense of optimism, self-efficacy, and adaptability. This profile indicated that her subscale scores

were consistent with her average Sense of Mastery Scale Score. Emily's Sense of Relatedness subscale scores indicated that she had an average sense of trust, support, comfort, and tolerance. Her Emotional Reactivity subscale scores indicated that she had an average sense of sensitivity, recovery, and impairment.

Autumn was an 11-year-old fifth grader who lived with her mother and father and two older brothers. She had been at the school since Pre-Kindergarten. Autumn was an English language learner in a bilingual classroom at the time of the study. She had an overall grade average of 88 with the highest of her grades being in English Language Arts. She had an RSCA score of 53.5 that fell in the average range of T-scores for overall resiliency. During the focus group meeting, she was somewhat quiet and seemed distracted by my note taking. She seemed more open in the second session as compared to the first.

Autumn's RSCA profile reported a high Sense of Mastery, a below Sense of Relatedness and an average Emotional Reactivity. Figure 6 illustrates a subscale profile for Autumn as it related to her Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness, and Emotional Reactivity.

Figure 6

Subscale Profile for Autumn

Autumn's Sense of Mastery subscale scores indicated that she had an above average

sense of optimism and self-efficacy but her sense of adaptability was average. Autumn

had a below average sense of trust and tolerance and her sense of support and comfort

were average. Autumn's Emotional Reactivity subscale scores indicated that she had an

average sense of sensitivity and recover yet she had an above average sense of

impairment.

Aubree was an 11-year-old English language learner in a bilingual classroom.

This was her first year at the school as she attended another school within the district in

fourth grade. Prior to attending school in this district, she attended school in her home

country of Mexico. Aubree lived with her mother, father, and aunt but went to Mexico on

the weekend to be with her extended family. She crossed the border every Friday after

school and again every Monday morning at four o'clock. She essentially lived and

functioned in two countries and was able to be academically successful. She had an

overall grade average of 91 with the highest of her grades being in math. Aubree did not

meet one of the criteria for participation in that she only had one year of state testing data. I included Aubree in this study as she offered a most unique perspective. She had an RSCA score of 52 that fell in the average range of T-scores for overall resiliency. Aubree had the lowest resiliency score of all the focus group participants. At the beginning of the first focus group meeting, she discussed her ideas freely and with ease, but near the end of the session she became melancholy and her participation declined as she reflected on the death of a loved one. During the other sessions she shared her ideas freely.

Aubree had an average Sense of Mastery and Sense of Relatedness. Aubree's score reported a level of Emotional Reactivity that was below average. Figure 7 illustrates a subscale profile for Aubree as it related to her Sense of Mastery, Sense of Relatedness and Emotional Reactivity.

Figure 7

Subscale Profile for Aubree
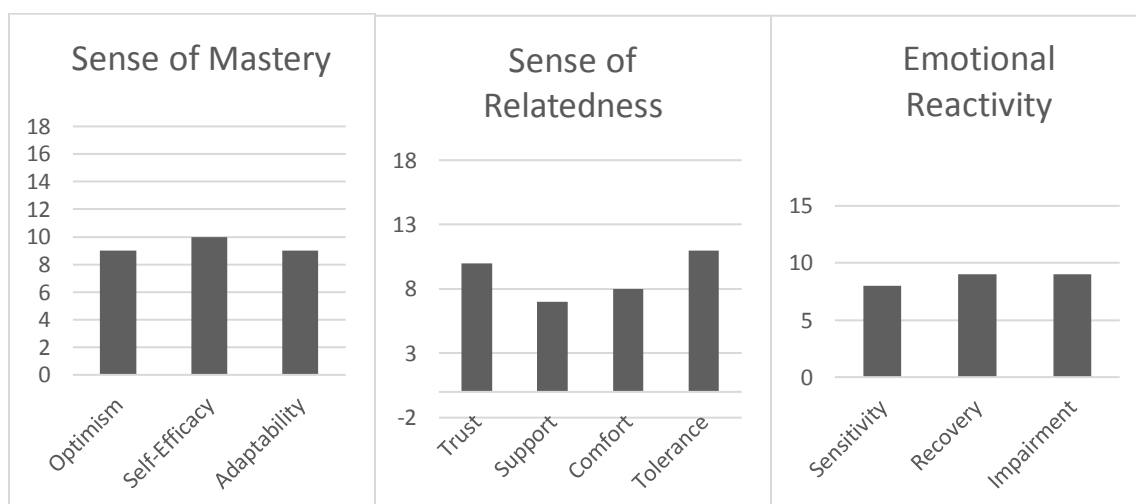
Aubree's Sense of Mastery subscale scores indicated that she had an average sense of optimism, self-efficacy, and adaptability that correlated to her overall score of average Sense of Mastery. Aubree had an average sense of trust, comfort, and tolerance, however,

Aubree had a below average sense of support. Aubree's Emotional Reactivity subscale scores indicated she had an average sense of sensitivity, recovery, and impairment.

Throughout the focus group sessions, the girls consistently shared that they often relied on external factors (e.g., parents/relatives, friends, and school counselors) as well as internal factors (e.g., will to do better next time and inner qualities like faith). The pages that follow present perceptions expressed by the girls and are the major findings and themes that emerged.

Thematic Analysis

According to Richardson's Resilience Model (Richardson, 2002), the girls existed in a state of homeostasis or comfort and a life stressor can disrupt that comfort zone. The girls in the focus group reported that several stressors were present in their academic and social lives. Primarily, they discussed their angst at the loss of a loved one, unclear expectations from teachers, and bullying. They mentioned on occasion other possible life stressors (e.g., inattentiveness and academic stress) that could make them academically unsuccessful. To address what factors contribute to the resilience of at risk yet academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty, discussion in the focus group began with a reflection on what challenges the girls faced in the past to cause disruption.

Life Stressors

Coping with loss

When asked about their first life challenge, Aubree melancholically recalled the death of her uncle. She shared that it was a very difficult time for her because she did not get the opportunity to spend as much time with him as she would have liked. She further elaborated that he had been the biggest supporter of her coming to the United States to

finish her education, "When I come to this country, it was horrible, because I did not know much of the language and I did not want to leave my family in México. But my uncle, he told me there was much opportunity here for me." Reflecting on this time caused Aubree to cry and the girls became somber and the once festive mood of the session shifted.

Emily also expressed having difficulty in dealing with the loss of her grandfather. She stated:

My grandpa used to teach me everything because I did not want to go to Head Start. He helped me with my alphabets and everything and it would be a lot for me but he would always encourage me. When he died, my grandma couldn't teach me. She tried to help but it's like my grandpa knew more things than my grandma but my grandma knew other things than my grandpa.

Similarly, Ashley expressed that the loss of her grandfather was the most stressful time of her life because, "I have never seen my father cry before. He is the rock of our family and to see him like that made me believe the world was going to end." Autumn reflected that she too had lost her grandfather, and that, although she was young, she could still remember how it felt to see her parents "so wounded that it made my hands sweat and my heart beat faster."

In one of the focus group sessions, Jessika shared that she was recently diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and that this was "like a death of me." When asked to elaborate, Jessika stated:

This disease is like a death of me because I take ballet. In ballet you have to have your hands perfectly; your head angled perfectly; you can't be leaning over; you

have to suck in your tummy and pull in your butt. The medicine I take makes it hard for me to do these things and I feel like I'm losing myself.

When discussing how the girls cope with loss, it is important to note that while working on the last chapter of this dissertation, I was notified that Ashley passed away in a house fire. This news was both heartbreaking and sad to hear. I was in shock for several days and did not know what to do. I learned that the family had set up a GoFundMe account to raise funds for not only the participant but also for her mother and little sister who died in the fire as well. My mind was numb and racing at the same time.

Eventually my thoughts turned to the other girls who participated in the focus group - if they had heard the news, and how they were taking the news. I reached out to the counselors of their respective middle school to see if I could get in contact with them. The counselors were helpful in arranging grief sessions for all the students and upon attending one of these grief sessions I had the opportunity to talk with my girls. I call them my girls because we forged a bond during our time together and they are forever etched in my mind and heart.

My girls were not faring well at all with the news. I thought we needed to do something and they thought they needed to do something, but we didn't quite know what to do… We collectively were lost. This was the first time that any of the girls had experienced the loss of a friend. I did not experience the loss of a friend until high school so this was new territory for us all.

The girls and I decided to meet together outside of the school setting and grief counseling sessions. We met at a park near where the girls lived. I spoke to the girls about my friend Hope, who had died in a car accident when we were in high school. I

told them that one of the first things I did was to cut the article out of the newspaper and then write a poem about our friendship. I also told them that Hope's mother had selected me to be one of the individuals to speak at Hope's funeral and how my heart was in my throat the entire service but the moment I started to speak about our friendship, my heart smiled. It was sort of my release, telling myself everything was going to be okay. Thinking back to that time, I also had a friend die due to gun violence on my birthday during my senior year of high school and that was a much harder loss for me to handle.

After sharing my story with the girls, I asked them what they would like to do to remember Ashley. Suggestions included planting a tree, setting up a scholarship fund, donating books in her honor to the school, holding a vigil for her at the park. I left the choice in the hands of the girls and they decided to do a vigil at the park nearest the school where we had our sessions. We also made an anonymous donation to the GoFundMe account set up by the family.

The girls used their English Language Arts class to create a flyer for the vigil. Flyers were posted at both the elementary school and middle school Ashley attended. I made arrangements for doves to be released in her memory on the day of the event. When the day finally came, the girls asked all who assembled to form a large circle and interlock arms. Jessika read a poem and the doves were released into the sky. After the doves were released I could hear someone in the crowd say, "Always Ashley."

That slogan is how my girls and I recall Ashley and remember the spark she put in our lives. I made a commitment to check on my girls through their counselors on a monthly basis; that is my homage to Ashley, whose impact in a short time was huge. The girls continued to speak to the counselors and sought support as needed.

The girls in the focus group were most often able to achieve resilient reintegration. However, with the loss of Ashley, the girls reintegrated with loss. While they were able to access support from their parents as well as the counseling staff at school, they lost the protective factor of a friend. Through the process of the memorial and with the support of the other focus group members, the girls moved toward homeostasis and eventually achieved resilient reintegration. Based on the interaction of the girls during the counseling sessions and memorial, the focus group created a buffer to protect the girls from further disruption due to this loss.

Unclear Teacher Expectations

When discussing support of others and how it influences the girls academically, the focus group sessions revealed how teachers' unclear expectations of students may be a cause for their lack of motivation and discord with certain subjects. Jessika stated:

I don't like Reading, because there aren't a lot of rules and I like things that have a lot of rules. Like in Reading they [teachers] could say write a poem. I have to know what kind of poem; what topic; how long; how big. I like rules. So when I try to write the poem, it's never what the teacher expected from me.

Ashley agreed with Jessika's statement about teachers and stated, "Like, they [teachers] will tell you to write a poem, any style, any way you want; and then when you turn it in, they say, that's not what I wanted." Ashley went on to elaborate that with changes (e.g., mastering more skills) teachers' expectations changed.

The girls' concern was that teachers sometimes did not uphold their side of the relationship between students and teachers. Some teachers seemed to focus more on the academically low students and offered little to no assistance to the academically

successful students. Aubree expressed her concern that teachers do not give structure at the beginning of the assignment and then, "when I do it, the teacher tells me to redo it." Jessika elaborated by saying, "when there is one teacher and say 30 fifth graders, we sometimes become student helpers without fully understanding some assignment expectations ourselves."

Bullying

In the first focus group session, it was revealed how other students' perception of the girls can lead to low self-efficacy and lower academic performance. When asked about their most recent challenge to academic success, Autumn replied, "Bullying." She further stated:

> Teachers call out our grades sometimes and the kids always say 100 when she calls out my grade, no matter what my grade may be. Because of this I get pushed around on the playground and called a lot of not nice names.

When asked if this situation caused her grades to suffer, Autumn stated, "Yes and I still feel uneasy when I think about it even though it doesn't happen anymore because he (the bully) moved away. Likewise, Ashley explained that, "…last week there was a kid that was telling people not to touch a rope I touched and called me a loser." Ashley elaborated that even though she has high grades in school it was not seen as a desirable thing to her classmates. Emily also expressed having difficulty with bullies in school and that she had to seek help from her mother and the counselor because it had gotten so bad.

The girls also talked about being falsely labeled as bullies by one particular student:

This girl named Ainsley Thomas (a pseudonym) tells people that we are bullying

her when in fact she is bullying us. It has gotten worse because now she wants to

be a safety patrol, and she threatens us to not say anything to Coach.

Ashley added that her friend told her that Ainsley was always talking about her and that "she was always saying negative stuff." Similarly, Aubree recalled that because she sat next to her in class, Ainsley "passes her mean notes saying that she is not a good friend and no one likes her." These girls' statements iterate how peers can negatively impact academic success.

Other Life Stressors

The girls mentioned several stressors during their individual responses in the focus group sessions that were shared among the group. However, two life stressors that did not emerge across the girls' responses nor were they elaborated on by the girls in the focus group sessions were academic stress and inattentiveness.

Academic Stress. Emily mentioned being stressed and having to take a quiz or test and not doing well as a factor for her not feeling academically successful. She shared:

Right now we are learning division, and although I get it Mrs. S says I need to get

higher grades. She sets really high expectations for me because she knows I love

math. That stresses me because I put extra pressure on myself so I don't

disappoint her.

Emily was the only focus group member to mention academic stress as a life stressor to her academic success.

Inattentiveness. "When you don't pay attention to the teacher because you think you know it already" was Ashley's explanation of a contributing factor that resulted in

her receiving a grade that she didn't feel successful about. Ashley was the only focus group member to mention inattentiveness as a life stressor to her academic success.

The resiliency process is a life-enriching model that suggests that life stressors provide growth and increase resilient qualities or protective factors (Richardson, 2002). The girls were able to identify the causes of disruption in their lives and to that end they also identified the coping processes or protective factors that led them to reintegration. These protective factors acted as a buffer between the girls and adversity.

Protective Factors

The fifth grade girls in the focus group used several protective factors to be academically successful including establishing and maintaining positive friendships, having a role model, and possessing certain inner qualities.

Establishing and Maintaining Positive Friendships

During each focus group session, the girls discussed the important role that friends played in their success in school. The most important theme that emerged from the discussion centered on the creation and maintenance of positive relationships with their friends.

According to Jessika, "close friends" were most important to her success. She explained that her "close friends" were "like a sister" and "intelligent like her". Emily also stated that she "makes friends that make good grades, but they're older, too, so that they can help me when I don't get something right away." Likewise, Ashley communicated that if she was unable to be with her friends she would try to find a family member but that her friends "could never be replaced." Ashley further stated that she had

"two or three other friends" but if she was apart from her "best friend the other friends could not take her place."

Aubree added to the conversation by saying, she developed close friends, because they "practiced English with me." She further explained that many of her friends were "learning English" like her so they had "a bond in two languages."

Autumn said that if she were unable to communicate with her friends, "my grades would suffer". When asked why, Autumn said, "Because I would be worried about them and thinking about them instead of my work."

Role Models

Parents or other relatives. In each focus group session, the girls discussed the importance of the role that their parents or other relatives played in their success in school. Autumn explained that her father was the reason she tried to succeed in school. She said "My father was successful in school. So, I've got to do what he did." She also said, "My father is the reason I love math so much. He always had good grades in school but his best grades were in math." She explained that her father always encouraged her to do well in school.

Ashley shared that the praise of her older brothers helped her to do well. She stated, "My brothers are always there pushing me and encouraging me." Emily shared that her mother inspired her to do well. She stated, "She challenges me to do well to make a better future. She wants to make me successful."

Aubrey stated that when she first arrived in the United States, her parents helped to increase her knowledge of the English language by exposing her to more English instead of her native language. She explained, "... our family from Mexico told them to

do this and my parents told me to listen to music in English and watch TV shows in English." She also expressed how her aunt, since her uncle's death, helped her with English. She said, "My aunt lives here now and we help each other with our English."

Jessika mentioned multiple people who helped her be successful in school. She shared that her parents also encouraged her to do well in school. As she explained, "…they push me to strive for all As." She also stated that a family friend inspired her to do well, too. "My dad's friend, he's a scientist. He's like the first really smart person we know. So, he pushes me to follow my dream of being a physicist. He's always like, 'You can do it!'"

Emily shared that her mother influenced her academic success the most. Her mother helped her to set future goals of being better off economically and encouraged her to do well in school. She said, "…my mom had all A's in school and did well in math. I get my strength in math from her."

Possessing Certain Inner Qualities

All of the girls in the focus group shared and attributed their academic success to inner qualities uniquely defined by each girl. The most commonly mentioned internal factors were their strong sense of self-efficacy or a strong sense of faith.

When asked what prevented their grades from falling during a challenging time Jessika immediately answered, "Faith." Ashley, Autumn, and Aubree, quickly stated, "Yes, that's true." Emily further explained the necessity of having a belief in something higher than yourself or your parents, because "we are not in control of our destinies." According to Emily, having faith and dealing with loss are interrelated. She emphatically stated, "If you don't have faith, you won't get far in life." Similarly, Jessika shared her

views on having an inner quality like faith by saying that even if others don't believe, it is important for her to remain faithful. Jessika further shared, with a grin, "…since my diagnosis it is more important than ever for me to keep the faith."

The girls also mentioned other factors, such as the characteristics of being talented, intelligent, or confident. Jessika described a successful student's attitude by sharing, "She has to stay positive. She can never give up….. try, try, try at everything you do." Emily discussed the pressure that she placed on herself to be successful in school. She said,

I don't let my weak spots in anything keep me from whatever I am trying to accomplish. If you struggle, it's just a sign for you to work harder and don't give up. Don't let defeat beat you! I give myself pep talks a lot.

Emily mentioned that a successful student is "really smart and tries hard to graduate high school top of the class to go on to college."

Ashley and Autumn shared their beliefs in their own abilities to be successful in school or self-efficacy. Ashley stated that, "when I have a bad grade, I ask questions and work harder. I don't let what others say bother me. Who cares?" Autumn reflected and shared, "I make my weak areas strong by practicing until I reach my goal. I believe in my abilities." As described by the girls, these factors relates directly to research question one that asked what factors contributed to resilience in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty.

In comparing the girls' discussion on protective factors, specifically role models and other relatives, to the data gathered in the RSCA, the access to support subscale measured under the REL related directly to research question two. Research question two

asked what effect family had on the resilience in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty. The access to support (i.e. family) subscale was meant to measure the perceived access to support as this was equally as important as the availability of support. Support is defined as the belief that there are others to whom one can turn to when dealing with a disruption. When asked about their access to support the girls most often selected the response "almost always". In three instances the answer "often" was given: Aubree responded "often" twice and Autumn responded "often" once. Because most of the girls responded "almost always" a positive relationship can be drawn between academic success of fifth grade at risk girls and access to support (i.e. family).

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

This chapter included student participant profiles to allow readers a portrayal of the girls who took part in this study. It also included a presentation of findings that were drawn from the analysis of data. Those findings revealed that several life stressors such as unclear expectations of teachers, experiencing a loss, and bullying caused life disruptions. In addition, the girls discussed how several protective factors like establishing and maintaining positive friendships, having a role model, and possessing certain inner qualities helped them to continually achieve academic success.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter a discussion of the significant findings as they related to the research questions is presented. Implications and recommendations for practice, especially for elementary or primary educators, are suggested. Recommendations for future research are included at the end of the chapter.

Summary of Findings as they relate to the research questions

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that assisted in building resilience in young girls who lived in poverty that will positively impacted their academic success. Knowledge of which factors have enabled girls living in poverty to succeed will help teachers and other school personnel deal more effectively with students by supporting and enhancing academic resilience and promoting resiliency in the school environment. To that end, the following research questions served as guides to the study:

RQ 1: What protective factors contribute to resiliency in at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

RQ2: What effect does family have on the resiliency of at risk academically successful fifth grade girls living in poverty?

Resiliency Theory and Richardson's Resilience Model

Krovetz (1999) noted that "resiliency theory is based on defining the protective factors within the family, school, and community that exist for the resilient child or adolescent, which are missing from the family, school, and community of the child or adolescent who later receives intervention" (p. 121). Based on Krovetz's view, Richardson's Resilience Model was the theoretical framework that guided this study. A

more concise way of viewing resiliency theory is that there is a force within everyone

that pushes us to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual

source of strength (Richardson, 2002). Although for this group of girls the spiritual

source of strength was faith or God, the spiritual source did not necessarily have to be a

deity. The source could have been tangible or non-tangible (i.e. Wicca or Holistic).

Richardson's Resilience Model is a means whereby people, through planned disruptions

or reacting to life events, have the opportunity to choose consciously or unconsciously

the outcomes of disruptions (Krovetz, 1999).

Richardson (2002) described resilience through a linear model (Figure 1). The

model began with the stage of homeostasis (comfort zone) followed by a disruption. Each

path back to homeostasis is unique to the cause of disruption. When a disruption occurs,

an individual can reintegrate in four ways: dysfunctional, with loss, back to homeostasis,

or resilient reintegration. This model provided a framework for understanding the girls'

experiences and the findings of this study and framed the conclusions that follow.

The data from this study and the focus group discussions revealed that the girls

reintegrated after a disruption by relying on external factors (e.g., parents/relatives,

friends, and school counselors) as well as internal factors (e.g., will to do better next time

and inner qualities like faith). The girls discussed their negotiation between assessing

their situations (e.g., life stressors or lower grades) and implementing a plan of action via

the use of coping processes to avoid dysfunctional reintegration or reintegration with loss

in most cases. The girls' ability to make a choice regarding failing or succumbing to life

stressors or using protective factors to make a choice and reintegrate is central to

Richardson's Resilience Model. A girl who employed reintegration used protective

factors such as a role model, friend, or inner strength to be academically resilient as evidenced in the findings of this study.

Protective Factors

The study revealed that by employing the use of a protective factor, the girls created an additional layer of protection against disruptions to achieve resilient reintegration and remain academically successful. The most important protective factor mentioned by the girls was the creation and maintenance of positive relationships with their friends. When asked how important friendships were on a scale of 1 to 10, all the girls unanimously and emphatically replied "10." Autumn said that if she was unable to communicate with her friends, "My grades would suffer.' When asked why, Autumn said "because I would be worried about them and thinking about them instead of my work." Jessika, Ashley, and Emily empathetically agreed with a "yeah!"

The relationship between the RSCA data and the girls' feelings about the importance of the role that their friends, parents or other relatives played in their success in school were consistent throughout the study. When considering the impact of the girls' access to support, it was not surprising that relationships emerged as the most important protective factor for this group of girls to be academically resilient.

The resiliency model also takes into account how the girls reacted to the disruption, whether good or bad. The data revealed that the broad experiences of the girls in the study were discussed in the form of support structures. The support structures mentioned by the girls included friends and parents or other relatives. These were the external coping processes or protective factors the girls used to be and remain academically successful. However, the girls did not discuss other external protective

factors such as community and culture that are mentioned in the literature (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

The girls described that teachers' inactions led them to employ a protective factor to help them become more successful in school. Aubree expressed her concern that teachers did not give structure at the beginning of the assignment and then, "When I do it, the teacher tells me to redo it." Jessika elaborated by saying, "When there is one teacher and say 30 fifth graders, we sometimes become student helpers without fully understanding some assignment expectations ourselves." The girls, Emily in particular, sought assistance from a protective factor such as a big brother in order to achieve resilient reintegration when they dealt with unclear expectations set by teachers. When asked, why not the teacher, Emily stated that, "I mainly talk to my brother because he will give me advice on whatever I'm struggling with." Through the use of a protective factor Emily found an additional source of strength that made her a better student than before she experienced the disruption of unclear teacher expectations.

The girls described how through the use of protective factors they were able to achieve resilient reintegration after having dealt with a bully. Emily relied on her mom and the school counselor. Likewise, Ashley and Aubree used a Coach to help them achieve resilient reintegration from an instance of being bullied. The data illustrates how the girls were able to reintegrate as evidenced by their focus group discussion that centered on unclear teacher expectations and bullying.

The girls in the focus group were quite aware of their academic standings and took several actions to maintain their success. They gauged when something was not working, sought help or support from a role model or figured out on their own what they

needed to do to try to improve. The relationship between the girls and their chosen protective factor in lieu of seeking support from the teacher led them to the outcome of resilient reintegration, an introspective process involving experiencing some type of growth through a disruptive life event. The girls most often were able to achieve resilient reintegration.

The girls in this study attributed their success to inner qualities uniquely defined by each girl. The most commonly mentioned internal factors were their strong sense of self (self-efficacy) or their strong sense of faith. When asked what prevented their grades from falling during a challenging time Jessika immediately answered, "Faith." Ashley, Autumn, and Aubree, quickly stated, "Yes, that's true." Emily further explained the necessity to have a belief in something higher than yourself or your parents, because "we are not in control of our destinies." According to Emily having faith and dealing with loss are interrelated. She ardently stated that "If you don't have faith, you won't get far in life." Ashley and Autumn shared their beliefs in their own abilities to be successful in school or self-efficacy. Ashley stated that, "When I have a bad grade, I ask questions and work harder. I don't let what others say bother me. Who cares?" Autumn reflected and shared, "I make my weak areas strong by practicing until I reach my goal. I believe in my abilities." Based on focus group discussion, the girls often sought help from within prior to seeking assistance from other resources.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher created Figure 8 to depict the nature of resilient reintegration as it related to the academic success of the focus group participants. A student who experienced a life stressor which led to disruption must employ a coping process to be and remain academically successful as evidenced in the

findings of this study. Figure 8 also shows that a student may reintegrate in several ways

through the use of coping processes. These coping processes create an additional

protective shield from disruptions caused by life stressors.

Figure 8

Reintegration as it Relates to Successful at risk fifth grade Girls
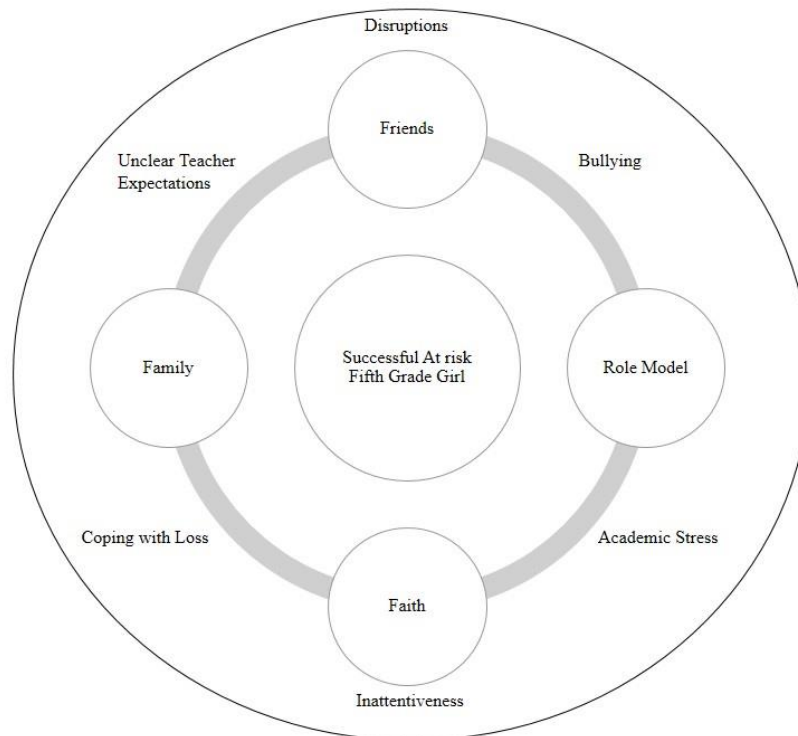
To this group of girls, friends, family, and role models as well as faith were the

most important protective factors to remain academically successful. The girls

reflected on their disruptions both in and out of the school setting, however, they did not

point to protective factors within the school setting that increased their academic

resiliency, as identified in the literature (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2004).

The girls identified and shared their ideals about several disruptions (e.g. bullying

and coping factors) that were included in the literature. During the focus group sessions

the girls did not discuss the life stressor of poverty, which was found throughout the literature. The girls' inability to point to poverty as a risk was consistent with the literature in that student participants could be unaware of the risk because it is presumed as normal (e.g. they don't realize they are living in poverty). On the other hand, the findings revealed that unclear teacher expectations and coping with loss were also life stressors or risk factors and neither was discussed in the literature.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Practice**</div>

To address the contributions of this study, the findings provide needed background information to primary educators of academically successful at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty. Results of this study suggest several important recommendations by which educators can better meet the needs of academically successful at risk fifth grade girls living in poverty. These recommendations are specific to the district in which the study took place and are meant to inform local district policy in order to obtain a different outlook on the academic performance of girls as well as their social and emotional needs.

Educator Recommendations

Educators should hold all girls to high standards, regardless of the girls' present academic level. The girls in this study were aware of those teachers who had unclear expectations of them but who still held them to a higher standard. Although the interactions between educators and students is impactful for all, students living in poverty are likely to benefit the most by this single resource of support than any other group of students (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). To accomplish this, educators should administer interest surveys to students to ascertain content area interests and to also gain insight on

content areas in which students may struggle. Once this information is received, the teacher can support the student in her interests and also can build capacity in an area in which she may be less interested.

Educators should respect and value at risk yet academically successful girls as they navigate through life stressors toward reintegration. The actions of educators should include respecting and valuing girls' assessment of their own academic success and allowing girls to enable their voices. It would also be valuable for educators to allow girls to discover, then openly share, their academic concerns as well as help students with bullying concerns and self-reflection activities as they relate to academic or personal success. For educators this would mean:

1. Providing opportunities of increased support or guidance once the girls determine what changes they need to make to continue to be successful in school.

2. Encouraging girls to enable their voices, assisting and supporting them as they determine what changes they can implement to help manage their learning, and motivating them to achieve their goals.

3. Implementing effective student-student mentoring programs, and affording girls clear expectations of peer tutoring and the feeling that the teacher hears them.

Academic Recommendations

Another recommendation is based on the girls' central interest in the content areas of math and science. Some girls may need more academic support than they currently receive, especially as they transition from elementary to secondary school. In the focus

group sessions, the girls mentioned their interest in a subject as a major cause of their current academic success. As a result, educators and campus administration (especially at the local level within the district where the study took place) should consider providing more opportunities to academically successful girls by providing quality instructional programs, such as a Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) program. To that end is the possibility of opening a single gender school to foster collegiality among girls, increasing the access to support from friends, and improving instructional practices in the areas of STEM.

Parent/Community Recommendations

The findings regarding the many coping processes that the girls discussed prompt several recommendations. First, educators at the local level could seek to include and build upon parent-school and teacher-student relationships by implementing more inclusive parent or other adult role model involvement opportunities. For example, invite local businesses in to help judge the science fair or invite parent entrepreneurs to a career day. Second, educators at the local level could also provide ways for girls to decrease instances of bullying through community and school-based partnerships such as Girls' Inc., an organization that focuses on building lasting mentoring relationships with girls in an emotionally and physically safe environment to set goals, overcome obstacles, and be successful.

In addition, campus based educators should help parents foster the continued growth of the girls' academic skills. Based on the findings, it may be advantageous to find ways for girls to become more involved with school academic-based organizations and programs (e.g., student council) or community-based organizations (e.g., Girl Scouts)

to hone their academic skills outside of the school setting. By providing access to these types of systems, girls then have access to community resources as an additional support system or protective factor.

Recommendations for Research

The girls in this study identified interest in a specific content area as a primary factor that led them to being academically successful. Further research should be done to find out from what type of on-going support at risk yet academically successful girls would benefit most, specifically if they already have a higher performance level in these content areas. In addition, it would be advantageous to conduct focus group studies that explore the risk factor of loss as it specifically relates to at risk yet academically successful girls. Furthermore, it would be useful to explore the life stressors and coping factors experienced by groups of girls who have experienced a loss, and compare them to girls who have not, to gauge how or when resilient reintegration begins.

Based on the findings regarding coping processes, and as an additional area to research, it would be beneficial to explore how this specific group of girls selected and used their inner qualities to continue to be successful in both middle and high school. The students had rich discussions about their strong sense of self (self-efficacy) and faith that were instrumental to their success in fifth grade.

In addition, the study uncovered that resilience appears to be an ongoing process with an individual possibly being in various phases of the resiliency process at the same time. For example, the girls were dealing with unclear teacher expectations at the middle school level when they encountered the loss of Ashley. The path to reintegration for these

two life stressors occurred simultaneously. Each girl used several coping processes to be resilient and those protective factors varied by girl as well as by life stressor. While the Richardson Resilience Model (2002) is helpful, additional research should be done that explores the cyclical nature of how at risk yet academically successful girls could experience several life stressors at once, what protective factors the girls identify to assist in reintegration, and what type of reintegration occurs.

Conclusions

The use of qualitative methods guided a deep exploration of the perceptions of at risk yet academically successful fifth grade girls. The discussions during the focus groups led to an increased awareness of protective factors employed by the girls to remain academically successful. The girls in this study were resilient because they felt supported by friends and family and other caring adults.

In the context of this study and the girls' perceptions of life stressors, it is important to note that there was no passport that allowed "safe passage" across the borders that these girls faced or the borders I faced as a previously identified at risk girl. Borders can be perceived as tangible – the crossing of an international line like Aubree or that of crossing zoning boundaries, like I did to attend a better school; or they can be nontangible – illness as in the case of Jessika or language as in the cases of Ashley, Aubree, and Autumn. While our borders or life stressors may be different, the goal was and is the same – life success. Strengthening the ties of friends, family, or the individual is imperative to ensure the offset of these borders and to promote the likelihood of continued success.

The findings of this study may help to inform local instructional policy that encourages academic excellence in all girls regardless of risk status. It is important to note that even if an at risk girl rises above her circumstances to become academically successful, she still cannot control her environmental factors. Ashley was resilient academically but her life circumstances were beyond her control, a fact that is still a hard pill for me to swallow. She was only 12 years old with a lifetime of success ahead of her.

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APPENDIX A

MINOR ASENT AND PARENT CONSENT FORMS

APPENDIX A

ASSENT OF MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

Student Project Director: Niccole Delestre,
(xxx) xxx - xxxx, ndeles@myemail.com

Faculty Sponsor: Lisa Jones, EdD, (281) 283 - 3551, jonesl@uhcl.edu
School of Education, University of Houston – Clear Lake

You are being asked to help in a research project called building resiliency and the project is part of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. The purpose of this study is to identify factors that will positively impact the academic success of young girls who live in poverty. You will be asked to take a survey and then possibly participate in a group discussion. Your help will be needed for one day to take the survey and then two additional days for group discussions.

You do not have to help if you do not want, and you may stop at any time even after you have started, and it will be okay. You can just let the researcher know if you want to stop or if you have questions. If you do want to participate in the project, it will help us a great deal.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS   HAS REVIEWED AND APPROVED THIS PROJECT. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UHCL COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (281-283-3015).   ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT UHCL ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.   (FEDERALWIDE ASSURANCE # FWA00004068)

Please keep the upper part of this page for your information. Thank you for your assistance.

* *

_____ Yes, I agree to allow my child to participate in the study on Resiliency: Factors Affecting Academic Achievement of At Risk Fifth Grade Girls Living in Poverty.

_____No, I do not wish to allow my child to participate in the study on Resiliency: Factors Affecting Academic Achievement of At Risk Fifth Grade Girls Living in Poverty.

_____

Printed name and Signature of parent or guardian   Date

_____

Printed name and Signature of child assenting   Date

_____

Printed name and Signature of **Witness** of child's assent   Date

CONSENTIMIENTO DE MENORES PARA PARTICIPAR EN INVESTIGACIÓN DE EDUCACIÓN

Directora Estudiantil del Proyecto: Niccole Delestre (xxx) xxx-xxxx,
ndeles@myemail.com

Facultad Patrocinadora: Lisa Jones EdD, (281) 283-3551, jonesl@uhcl.edu
Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Houston-Clear Lake

Se le pide la participación de su hija en un proyecto de investigación que forma parte de mi tesis doctoral en la Universidad de Houston-Clear Lake. El propósito de este estudio de investigación es identificar los factores relacionados a la resiliencia que pueden impactar positivamente en el éxito académico de las niñas de quinto grado. Se le pedirá que su hija tome una encuesta y luego, posiblemente, que participe en una discusión de grupo. Se necesita su ayuda por un día para participar en la encuesta y luego dos días adicionales para discusiones de grupo.

No tiene que participar si usted no quiere, y puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento, incluso después de haber empezado. Le puede informarle a la investigadora si desea dejar de participar o si tiene alguna pregunta. Si le gustaría participar en el proyecto, nos ayudaría muchísimo.

El Comité para la Protección de Sujetos Humanos de LA UNIVERSIDAD DE HOUSTON- CLEAR LAKE (UHCL) ha revisado y aprobado este proyecto. Alguna pregunta sobre sus derechos como sujeto de investigación puede ser dirigida al COMITÉ PARA LA PROTECCIÓN DE SUJETOS HUMANOS (281-283-3015). Todos los proyectos de investigación que se llevan a cabo por investigadores de UHCL SE RIGEN POR LOS REQUISITOS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD Y EL GOBIERNO FEDERAL. (Garantía Federal # FWA00004068)

Por favor, mantenga la parte superior de esta página para su información. Gracias por su ayuda.
****

_____Sí, estoy de acuerdo con permitir que mi hija participe en el estudio sobre la resiliencia y los factores que afectan el rendimiento académico de niñas de quinto grado.

_____No, yo no quiero permitir que mi hija participe en el estudio sobre la resiliencia y los factores que afectan el rendimiento académico de niñas de quinto grado.

_____
Nombre impreso y firma del padre o tutor   Fecha

_____
Nombre impreso y firma que indica el asentimiento de la niña   Fecha

_____
Nombre impreso y firma del testigo de asentimiento de la niña   Fecha

<p style="text-align:center">RÉSUMÉ</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Niccole R. Delestre</p>

Education
University of Houston – Clear Lake   Clear Lake, TX
EdD, Educational Leadership – 2016

University of Houston – Clear Lake   Clear Lake, TX
M.S., Educational Management – 2006

University of Houston   Houston, TX
Postgraduate Professional Certificate – 2001
Concentration: Elementary Education

University of Houston – Downtown   Houston, TX
B.S., Criminal Justice – 1998

Certifications
Elementary Self-Contained 1 – 8
Elementary English 1 – 8
ESL 1 – 8
Principal EC – 12
Mediation

Professional Experience
Adult Education

2012 – 2013 **Harris County Department of Education**
      Adult Education Educator – GED Fast Track and ESL– Houston, TX

K-12 Public Schools

2013 – present **Principal and Instructional Coach**
      El Paso Independent School District – El Paso, TX

2011 – 2013 **Classroom Teacher**
      Aldine Independent School District – Houston, TX

2004 – 2009 **Assistant Principal, Instructional Coach, and Classroom Teacher**
      Galena Park Independent School District – Houston, TX