CHARACTERISTICS, QUALITIES, AND TRAITS FOUND AMONG
ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL AT-RISK ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

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A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Humboldt State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

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May 2013
ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research study examines similar traits and characteristics found among academically successful at-risk elementary students in a rural elementary school setting. A sample population of fourteen 4th grade students who are all considered to be academically and socially at-risk, but nonetheless have succeeded in achieving academic success, were interviewed to identify common factors that helped them succeed in school. A researcher-made questionnaire consisting of fifteen questions was administered individually to each identified student.

It was discovered that four common traits or factors were present for these academically successful at-risk elementary students. These factors included a fervent desire to devote all of their attention to learning while in the classroom setting, clear and high expectations for academic success set at home and school including specific expectations for classroom behavior and interaction, strong parental or family involvement with the subjects and their schoolwork, and having supportive teachers, school staff, and family members who help lead students into making their own discoveries about learning.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, the completion of my thesis would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my family, specifically from my wife Tami and our daughters, Sophie and Breesia. I will always be grateful for their patience with me for all of the time spent away from family activities in order to complete this project.

Secondly, I am indebted to my advisor and major professor, Dr. Ann Diver-Stamnes, who provided the encouragement and support to help keep me in the master’s degree program when I felt I was not up to the task and was seriously considering withdrawing my enrollment. Without her guidance and encouragement, this project would not have been completed.

I would also like to thank Dr. David Ellerd, professor and committee member, for providing me with a strong foundation in qualitative research methods. It was through his influence and teaching practices that I developed a genuine interest in qualitative research methodology.

I am also grateful to my newfound friends/classmates within the master’s degree program with whom I have developed strong friendships and have come to rely upon for their collective support for each other and me as we have been working our way through the master’s degree coursework.
Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and offer my thanks to the students and their parents/guardians who gave their consent to be a part of my research project. Without them, this project would not have been possible.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In many of today’s schools, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to assure success for all of their students. Education professionals still maintain high levels of importance toward the goals of fostering and empowering enthusiastic life-long learners. Most educators enter the profession with a belief that every student can be successful, but as time passes on, fewer and fewer experienced educators hold on to that basic tenet as they once did when they entered into the profession. Many educators and individuals from the general population have fallen victim to the belief that students who are from less economically advantaged families do not have as great a chance to succeed in school as their counterparts who hail from more affluent backgrounds. These students are labeled as at-risk of academic failure, are often considered to be at-risk for future social instability, and are often not regarded as being productive citizens. In the school setting, the term at-risk is applied to students whose personal or family characteristics are associated with school difficulties. At-risk can more specifically be defined as those students who suffer from difficult living conditions due to issues of poverty and may also find themselves in an environment in which they need to learn a second language. Being a second language learner is considered to be an at-risk factor that sometimes can be detrimental to students in the school setting. At-risk students may be exposed to the effects of others’ abuse of drugs and alcohol which can lead to their own substance
abuse issues as they mature. Children who experience unstable home lives and those who have no positive role models may also be at risk.

The number of students who may be at-risk of school failure has increased over the past few decades with the increase of children residing in living environments that do not meet their basic needs. Some believe that multiple risks in students’ lives may presage an increasing number of children who could have negative life outcomes. Educators who work with these students face many challenges as they try to meet the needs of students from diverse socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Although some educators have become somewhat disillusioned and feel as though their students’ life issues are beyond their control, others feel that the interactions of educators and other positive role models can help foster educational resilience or the capacity of students to attain academic and social success in school despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities.

Some students are labeled at-risk due to their poor performance on day-to-day classroom assignments as well as their low scores on standardized tests. However, some students who are also considered to be at-risk do surprisingly well in school, despite their difficult home environments or their exposure to various risk factors. It seems as though these resilient at-risk students do not allow their environmental hardships to interfere with the learning process or their ability to be considered an academic success.
Students who are characterized by risk factors but do not manifest risk outcomes are referred to as being resilient. Resilient students are able to accept and work with life’s challenges, regardless of the number of at-risk factors of which they may be exposed. It is incumbent upon educators to aid these students in their quest to overcome at-risk behaviors in order to help them become resilient and eventually successful and productive citizens.

The purpose of this study is to identify primary factors, traits, or characteristics that successful at-risk students are using to help them be considered successful in the school setting. Specifically, it aims to determine if these types of positive traits, factors, or characteristics can somehow be transferred to less academically successful at-risk students.

*Overview of Thesis*

The research in this thesis considers the issues regarding factors and characteristics that contribute to the academic and social success of students who are considered to be at-risk of academic failure. The remaining chapters of the thesis are as follows. Chapter Two consists of a literature review which presents information from published research about childhood resiliency, especially with regard to identifiable traits and characteristics found among successful students; best teaching practices considered to promote student success and resiliency; and practices considered to foster student achievement and enhanced learning that can be used by both education professionals and by the caring adults in at-risk students’ lives.
Chapter Three offers a description of the methods used in this study which included the transcription of formal interviews conducted with fourth grade students considered to be at-risk of academic and social failure due to their association with identified risk factors, yet who have overcome their adversities and by definition are considered to be academically successful. The results of this research are shared in Chapter Four in which the students’ answers to the interview questions are examined by theme, and survey responses are presented. Chapter Five consists of an analysis of the students’ responses gained through the interview process. The thesis concludes with Chapter Six which describes the limitations of this study and implications for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Students who are at risk of academic failure often begin their formal school experiences with multiple problems that span traditional health, social, and educational systems (Lowenthal, 1996). Certain student characteristics and/or environmental factors help at-risk students compensate for or protect against social and personal disadvantages (Johnson, 1997). The assumption that at-risk students are less successful in their schooling experiences than those students who are considered more fortunate is very real among educators. Many in the education community seem to think that students who are faced with living in poverty are more susceptible to doing poorly in school (Johnson, 1997). However, in contrast, there are students who are considered at-risk who have broken from those stereotypical molds and are doing well both socially and academically (Payne, 2009). Those students manage to have successful school experiences in spite of the obstacles they face in their poverty-stricken homes and surroundings (Payne, 2009). These more successful at-risk students exhibit tendencies toward resiliency. These tendencies toward resiliency are based on defining the protective factors within the family, school, and community that are present for the resilient student, but seem to be missing from the family, school, and community of at-risk students who must later receive academic and/or behavioral interventions in order to help them achieve
school success (Krovetz, 1999).

Students who herald from living situations characterized by poverty and low socioeconomic standards often fall into at-risk social, academic, and behavioral situations. Specific actions and teaching methods enacted by their family members and teachers can help reverse negative outcomes. The following section of this literature review defines commonly accepted characteristics of students considered at-risk and the interventions of education professionals that can have a positive effect on at-risk students’ academic achievement behavioral characteristics.

At-Risk Students

Students identified as being at-risk of academic failure are subject to a litany of negative characteristics which may be learned at home and through association with their peers of like circumstances within their communities (Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford & Serra-Roldan, 2007). It is not uncommon for these behaviors to become firmly established during childhood and early adolescence (Edwards et al., 2007).

Common factors of at-risk students who come from impoverished backgrounds include the acceptance of and exposure to frequent tobacco use in the family, unhealthy dietary patterns, inadequate physical activity, as well as alcohol and drug use (Edwards et al., 2007). In addition, adolescents considered at-risk may also engage in sexual behaviors that can lead to exposure of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancy (Edwards et al., 2007). Subsequently, students
experiencing and exhibiting these types of at-risk behaviors can have a negative impact on the school environment as their problems frequently spill over into every aspect of their lives (Meyer, 1997). Some of the most committed and dedicated teachers may feel somewhat helpless as many of their at-risk students fall farther and farther behind in their academic progress (Meyer, 1997). In their interactions with students considered at-risk, overly busy and harried administrators routinely confront and deal with small and large crises that add countless demands on their time (Meyer, 1997). This has a tendency to interfere with their abilities to adequately and properly deal with students in a manner that might help resolve those students’ issues and circumstances with more permanent solutions (Meyer, 1997).

Overcoming the effects of being at-risk.

Fortunately, however, not all students who are considered at-risk do poorly in their experiences in the school setting. In fact, some do very well, and sometimes perform better than their peers who are not considered to be at-risk (Solo, 1997). Two central factors in students’ academic success include high expectations and the overt linkage of hard work to success (Solo, 1997). Successful students experience high academic expectations for their schooling from not only their teachers, but also their parents (Solo, 1997). Families and teachers who share high expectations for their students’ success in school are usually not disappointed (Solo, 1997). Additionally, at-risk students who are exposed to both teachers’ and parents’
admonishments to study and work hard also help at-risk students to be more successful (Solo, 1997). When families and educators successfully instill a strong work ethic in students that reinforces the concept that they must work hard and even struggle to overcome the effects of poverty and racism, they have a better chance of succeeding academically (Solo, 1997).

*Teachers’ interventions with at-risk students.*

More specifically, it has been determined that teachers can play an extremely important role in helping their at-risk students overcome tendencies toward academic failure by incorporating specific practices within their daily routines and interactions with at-risk students (Payne, 2008). In simplified terms, Payne has identified nine “powerful academic practices” that help at-risk students overcome the detrimental effects of poverty on their successes (Payne, 2008, p. 48). Educators must teach students to complete their assignments using high-quality work, and then willingly offer the support needed to achieve those expected levels of work quality. The expectation of high-quality work is preceded by the premise that the teacher-student relationship is already based upon mutual respect (Payne, 2008). At-risk students need to understand that what they are learning is relevant to their lives, and all new learning situations should be taught in a supportive context and collaborative format whenever possible (Marzano, 2010; Payne, 2008). Students who are considered at-risk should not be left on their own if their success on specific assignments is questionable. Whenever feasible, teachers should introduce new concepts and new
learning through paired assignments or cooperative groups (Marzano, 2010; Payne, 2008).

Additionally, students considered at-risk might not have adequate exposure to the five identified levels of English language usage (Joos, 1967). These consist of categories ranging from the lowest level of usage, intimate language, to the highest level, frozen language (Joos, 1967; Payne, 2008; Slaathaug, 2009). The first level, referred to as intimate language, consists of private or personal language shared between two individuals (i.e., husband and wife, twins). The second register of language is defined as the casual level that is commonly used between friends and acquaintances, family members, and teammates. The casual level contains few abstract words and is considered fairly informal (Joos, 1967; Payne, 2008; Slaathaug, 2009). The third level of language usage is referred to as the consultative register which is a mix of the previous level, casual language, and the fourth level, formal language. The consultative register usually encompasses two-way participation in a professional setting where background information is provided (prior knowledge is not assumed), and interruptions and feedback fillers are allowed (e.g., uh-huh, and I see). It consists of more complex syntax and involves longer phrases and sentences (Slaathaug, 2009). The use of consultative language frequently occurs between doctors and patients, attorneys and clients, and teachers and their students (Slaathaug, 2009). The fourth level of English usage, formal register, consists of one-way communication with no allowable interruptions, and is most commonly
used in impersonal, formal settings (Slaathaug, 2009). Formal language register follows a commonly accepted format that consists of the use of complete sentences, more complex syntax and specific word usage (Slaathaug, 2009). It is often used in situations where speakers are expected to show a higher level of respect to those with whom they are communicating (Slaathaug, 2009). The use of formal register is often used when making introductions between strangers, when a speaker is making rhetorical statements, and during speeches or official announcements. Formal register use is standard for work, school, public offices, and business settings (Slaathaug, 2009). The fifth level, or register, of English usage is referred to as frozen language. This typically consists of printed language in a more formal format that remains unchanged and almost always includes scripted phrases that do not vary (e.g., passages from the Bible, The Lord’s Prayer, The Pledge of Allegiance, specific laws, and the Preamble to the United States Constitution, etc.) (Slaathaug, 2009). At-risk students living in poverty may benefit from learning how to speak and write in a more formal register which may be quite different from how they typically communicate with family and peers (Hart & Risley, 1995).

In order to foster resiliency and to promote future success, at-risk students also benefit from learning the habit of asking thoughtful questions (Bickart & Wolin, 1997). Although teachers may face resistance from some of their at-risk students as they try to redirect their preferred styles of communication, they should strive to teach them how to communicate through consultative and formal registers (Joos,
1967; Payne, 2008; Slaathaug, 2009). It is also important for teachers to assess individual students’ available resources. For example, it is not educationally beneficial to assign students daily homework assignments if they do not have the means by which to successfully complete those assignments at home (Payne, 2008). It may be necessary to provide homework assistance on the school site before or after school, or during lunch periods in order for students to become more successful with their assignments (Payne, 2008). It is also important to continuously monitor and chart student progress and to plan needed interventions on a regular basis, so students have the opportunity to build strong academic foundations before advancing to higher-level concepts (Marzano, 2010). This type of practice allows at-risk students the opportunity to master needed academic material before moving on to more difficult or advanced subject matter (Marzano, 2010). Whenever possible, it is important to provide students with concrete examples of academic concepts before moving into more abstract representations of those same concepts (Marzano, 2010; Payne, 2008). Teaching students how to correctly formulate and ask questions in order to access and gain information also yields a large payoff in achievement (Marzano, 2010; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Students who lack the ability to ask good questions typically fall behind their peers who do have a better understanding of proper questioning techniques (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

One of the most important factors in helping at-risk students become more successful is for teachers to forge strong relationships with their students’ parents or
guardians (Payne, 2008). At-risk students living in a poverty-stricken environment may have parents/guardians who genuinely care about their children’s academic success, but those same caregivers may not know how to properly or sufficiently support their children’s learning (Payne, 2008). In order to foster positive and productive teacher-parent/guardian relationships, it becomes necessary for teachers and other school personnel to create a welcoming atmosphere at the school site and to consistently build positive relationships with students’ parents/guardians (Payne, 2008). Specific invitations from teachers to parents/guardians asking for their involvement in their children’s school activities have been shown to motivate parents’ participation in elementary through high school student populations (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007). Deliberate teacher invitations, especially to those parents/guardians who come from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, have a strong correlation between those parents’ attitudes toward their children’s schools and their increased involvement in school activities (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Additionally, the implementation of developmentally based best practices such as team-teaching, cooperative learning, and heterogeneous ability grouping has an association with better school climate and student achievement, as well as other positive outcomes for at-risk students (Scales, Benson, Roehlkepartain, Sesma Jr. & van Dulmen, 2006).
**Student actions that promote resiliency.**

Fostering resilience during the elementary years does not require teachers to add another component to an already overflowing curriculum, but can simply be accomplished by providing students with opportunities to develop behaviors associated with resilience during regular daily instruction (Bickart & Wolin, 1997). All students, especially those considered at-risk, must be involved in assessing their own work and in setting goals for themselves. It is important that the at-risk student’s final product or completed project is consistently compared to expected classroom standards (Bickart & Wolin, 1997). When feasible, students should be given the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers to practice making and sustaining fulfilling relationships with others (Bickart & Wolin, 1997; Marzano, 2010; Payne, 2008). At-risk students must also have opportunities to make choices. Giving children choices encourages creativity, but even more importantly, allows them the chance to express themselves through their individual work which ultimately leads to a feeling of acceptance and belonging in their classroom communities (Bickart & Wolin, 1997). Consistent practice in allowing at-risk students to creatively express themselves in a safe, non-threatening, and accepting classroom environment helps them develop the necessary tools they need to become resilient, productive, and successful individuals as they mature (Bickart & Wolin, 1997; Lowenthal, 1996).
The previous sections of this literature review highlighted documented actions and interventions by both educators and their students in helping at-risk students become more resilient despite their negative socioeconomic standing. The following section addresses deliberate actions that parents/guardians can take to also help alleviate the detrimental effects of poverty on their children.

*Parent/Guardian Actions that Promote Student Success*

Increasing parental school involvement has been an important part of local, state, and national education initiatives (e.g., Goals 2000; National Education Goals Panel, 1999). To implement these initiatives and increase academic success, especially for students considered at-risk of academic failure, many schools are making concerted efforts to reach out to parents and involve them in their children’s education (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). The scope and dimension of parental involvement practices spans a variety of types and methods of parent/guardian interventions (Colson, 2010). Practices may include parental instruction, parental reinforcement, parental modeling, and parental encouragement (Colson, 2010). To help children succeed in schools, professionals must work with the family system since “the family is the child’s first teacher” (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2001, p. 48) and the benefits of involving families in educating children are evident in research findings (Lam, 2005). As family involvement in schooling can benefit children, teachers, and families, it must be noted that family involvement is influenced by both school-related and family-
related factors (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005). School-related factors include teachers’ attitudes toward families and school and teacher expectations (Carlisle, et al., 2005). Family-related factors include ethnicity, prior school experiences, and family work schedules (Carlisle, et al., 2005). Whether parental actions are construed as home-based behaviors (e.g., assisting with homework), school-based activities (e.g., attending school sponsored events, volunteering), or parent-teacher communication (e.g., discussing homework/assignments with the teacher, attending parent/teacher conferences), parental involvement has been positively linked to indicators of students’ achievement, including teacher ratings of student competence, student grades, and achievement test scores (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Parental involvement has also been associated with other indicators of school success, including lower rates of grade level retention, lower drop-out rates, higher on-time high school graduation rates, and higher rates of student participation in advanced courses (Barnard, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). In addition, parental involvement has also been linked to psychological processes and attributes that support student achievement across all groups of students, including students at-risk for poorer educational or developmental outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005). Students’ motivational, cognitive, social, and behavioral attributes are particularly important because they are susceptible to direct parent/guardian and teacher influence. This type of direct influence affects students’ sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli,
Parents’ attitudes, behaviors, and activities related to their children’s education directly influence students’ learning and educational success (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 1999; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2007; Wang, Wildman, & Calhoun, 1996). Although research demonstrating the positive aspects that parental involvement has on student outcomes is well documented (Bandura, et al., 1996; Deslandes, et al., 1999; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 1999; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2007), there is also a body of research outlining potentially negative characteristics of parental involvement in their students’ educational settings (Brantlinger, 2003). When parent/guardian involvement is accompanied by beliefs that schools should give priority to one’s own child as well as one’s own views, needs, and social perspectives, often to the exclusion of other families’ needs and perspectives, such involvement can create substantial difficulties for members of the school community (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, & Guskin, 1996; Graue, Kroeger, & Prager, 2001; Lareau, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1996). Overly involved parents/guardians may diminish students’ opportunities to learn personal responsibility and may create debilitating pressures on schools’ abilities to meet the educational needs of all students (Brantlinger, 2003; Brantlinger, et al., 1996; Graue, et al., 2001; Lareau, 2003; Wells & Serna, 1996). Although at times, some instances
of parental involvement do have a negative side, it is most commonly accepted that the benefits of parental involvement far outweigh the potentially negative effects of parents/guardians becoming involved in their students’ education (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2007; Lam, 2005). Unfortunately, parental involvement has a tendency to decrease in students’ later middle school and high school years which can potentially lead to further declines in at-risk students’ academic achievement and success (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Conclusion

In review of the literature regarding attributes of both successful and non-successful at-risk students and the teachers and family members who work with them, it is evident that students, families, schools, and communities must work together to foster resiliency in students at-risk of academic failure. The former notion of the school as a fortress against the impact and influences of the community should be replaced with the notion of the school as a bridge into the community (Kozol, 1997). This must especially be done in cases where the at-risk student comes from a family unit with a long succession of negative environmental factors including poverty, poor educational achievement, and negative social and behavioral choices (Edwards, et al., 2007; Meyer, 1997). Students considered at-risk of failure on many different levels can overcome their circumstances and lead positive and successful lives with the early intervention and specific teaching and interactive practices of their teachers in addition to consistent and meaningful involvement in
their lives (especially in the school setting) by their parents/guardians. Finally, at-risk students can be taught interventions and strategies that they can implement in order to help them achieve a level of resiliency and success that can lead to productive and meaningful lives. This level of success can be achieved provided all stakeholders—students, parents/guardians, teachers, and the community—work as one team for the benefit of the student.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As an educator in the elementary school setting for the past thirty years, I have had opportunity to observe hundreds of students in a wide range of academic settings. For many of those years, I have held a curiosity regarding the seemingly inexplicable reasoning as to why some students perform much better academically than their counterparts who are similar in many ways. I have especially been curious as to why certain at-risk students perform better than some of their equally at-risk counterparts and in some cases, prove to be even more academically successful than their peers who are not considered to be at-risk. In this chapter, I will outline the development of a questionnaire used to probe the thoughts, intentions, and academic expectations of a specific number of elementary students who by all academic standards, are considered to be academically successful, but at the same time, are exposed to risk factors in their personal lives that have resulted in their being labeled at-risk students.

Development of Research Instrument

Based on my research question and from my review of related literature on this subject, I developed a qualitative survey instrument that was used by the researcher, which posed fifteen questions to pre-identified academically successful at-risk fourth grade students in face-to-face interviews. As this research project
required the cooperation of minors, this process was only begun after I received IRB approval and both parents/guardians and the respondents agreed to be a part of this research project. The students’ verbal responses were recorded and later transcribed. A color-coding system was developed to track responses on each specific question asked in the interview. The color-coded responses were then compared for any similarities that may have shown up in the students’ responses.

After many revisions and the rewriting of questions on multiple occasions, a final draft of the questionnaire was developed and was used for student interviews. The questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions total and began with an opening statement provided by the researcher to help put the students at ease before any responses were required of them. An ending statement was also read to all interviewees thanking them for their participation in the study. Of the fifteen questions asked, eleven were considered to be open-ended allowing for thoughtful and more personal responses with no limitations posed on student answers. The remaining four questions required just a yes or no answer or a simple response relevant to each student’s personal life or experiences. Overall themes that were posed through the interview had to do with the students’ general perceptions of their schooling experiences thus far in their academic careers and more specifically, focused on their perceived likes and dislikes regarding their overall feelings about school. They were also questioned as to why they felt they were considered academically successful and why their teachers felt they do well in school. Another
theme that was probed was their feelings toward higher education and what they felt the future held in store for them as far as choosing college or just moving directly into the job market without having a college degree. Another major theme that was addressed had to do with their perceptions of why some of their peers do poorly in school compared to them and what they felt might help those less successful students do better in an academic setting. A final theme addressed in the questionnaire addressed students’ perceptions of how caring adults in their lives have influenced their academic performance or expectations of success. (See Appendix A for the content of the questionnaire.)

Participants

Over the course of a two-month period, I conferred with the two fourth grade teachers at my school to help identify fourteen academically successful fourth grade students from their classes. We were looking to identify students who would typically be considered to be at-risk for academic failure due to their exposure to specific at-risk identifiers within their families of origin, such as coming from poverty-stricken backgrounds, having parents with little or no higher education or seeming lack of interest in education in general, coming from households with a single parent, or their exposure to illicit drug or alcohol abuse within their families, etc. After reviewing many students’ academic and behavioral performance within their classrooms, the total fourth grade enrollment of fifty-four students was narrowed down to fourteen potential candidates who by all standards, were
considered to be academically successful but were also known to be at-risk for academic failure due to their individual exposure to at-risk factors within their family units.

Once the potential candidates were identified, an initial letter of participation and consent was mailed to their parents/guardians. (See Appendix B for the content of the parent/guardian consent letter.) Upon receipt of the consent letter from the parent/guardian, the students were then interviewed by a familiar and trusted school employee who attempted to gain their assent as minors to be participants in the study. (See Appendix C for the content of the student assent letter.) All fourteen students who were initially selected to be participants in the study offered their assent to participate and soon began to question me as to when they could actually begin the interview process as they seemed to be excited about the prospects of being participants in this study.

I made sure to inform all parents/guardians and participating students that all of their responses would be kept confidential and that there would be no identifying information gathered on individual respondents. The parents/guardians and participating students were fully informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the study and were specifically informed that they did not have to answer any question of which they may have felt any type of discomfort in answering. They were also informed that there would be no right or wrong answers to the survey questions and that any and all responses would be welcomed.
Personal benefits for participation in the study included a possible increase in self-esteem for being selected to participate based on their academic success, having additional one-to-one time with a caring adult who actively listened to their personal responses, and the knowledge that their participation in this study could potentially assist other less successful students at the school if it were possible to utilize results of the study across the school’s student population. There were no glaringly potential risks to students aside from the fact that some of the students may have been initially nervous and/or uncomfortable when asked to answer personal questions about their study habits and home environments. There was also a slight possibility that some students may have felt uncomfortable at the prospect of being singled out from their peers to participate in the study, although this researcher did not detect any of these types of negative feelings in any of the respondents before, during, or after the interviews took place.

Procedure

Over the course of one week, individual participants were asked to join me in the counselor’s office to complete the 15-20 minute interview. The school counselor was very accommodating in giving up her office for an hour per day in order for me to meet with three to four students on a daily basis throughout the week. The counselor’s office was chosen due to its comfortable and child-friendly atmosphere. The room had several incandescent lamps instead of overhead fluorescent lights for lighting, was filled with an aromatic fragrance, and had soft music playing in the
background. The room was equipped with two comfortable chairs and had nice carpeting. Stuffed animals, a sand tray, and many types of toys and games were on display on the shelving around the room. Colorful and child-friendly pictures aligned the walls. The surroundings provided for an extremely relaxed atmosphere, which seemed to help put students at ease as we worked our way through the interview process. The counselor’s office at this school has a reputation of being a fun and favorite place for students to visit.

Once the interviewer and respondent were seated across from each other in the two comfortable chairs, the interview commenced with a short statement read by the interviewer thanking all participants for their willingness to be interviewed for the study. (See Appendix A for the content of the opening statement.) Once the statement was read, the interviewer asked the participants if they were ready to begin and if so, would they mind if the tape recorder was turned on in order to record their responses. Once I received their verbal permission, we began the interview process. Each question was asked and an opportunity for the subsequent response was given to each student. Although there was never an instance where a student declined to answer a question because he/she felt uncomfortable in answering it, there were a few occasions where the students indicated they did not know of an answer for a particular question. They were assured that it was perfectly fine to skip over that question if they didn’t have an answer and we just went on to the next question until the interview was completed.
At the conclusion of each interview, the students were given the opportunity to ask questions or provide comments about their experience. Most of the respondents did not have any additional questions, although a couple of the students asked for more clarification as to why I was completing this survey and what I intended to accomplish by going through this process. One particular student asked why she had been chosen to participate. She was told that due to her success as a student, I wanted to know a little bit more about her feelings as to why she was so successful.

After the completion of the interviewing session, all students were personally thanked for their willingness to participate in the interview, and for their time and candidness in answering the interview questions. They were also thanked for their role in helping the interviewer complete his research study. It seemed as though many of the students felt as if they contributed to something that might help make a difference for other students at their school.

Upon completion of all of the interviews, the students’ tape-recorded responses were transcribed in order to code their responses and identify similar themes or traits regarding their responses. Narrative and quantitative data were sorted into various themes based on each survey question. By making the comparisons of respondents’ answers to each question asked on the survey, I was able to identify core ideas/themes that were similar in many of the students’
responses. Their responses began to shed light on common traits and characteristics that I had hoped to identify in these academically successful at-risk students.

Conclusion

The verbal responses of the fourteen academically successful at-risk students did in fact reveal similar traits, factors, and characteristics found among their collective success and provided rationale behind their individual successes. Transcripts of their responses were examined and coded for overarching themes. The next chapter will provide an overview of the demographics of each of the research participants, the overarching themes of their collective responses, and a description of the results of the interviews.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of participant demographics in addition to descriptions and excerpts of student responses elicited from student interviews in regard to academically successful at-risk students’ feelings about their educational experiences. As the survey was completed face-to-face with the researcher and respondents, participants’ reactions varied throughout the course of the interviewing process, but on the whole, participants seemed comfortable and willing to discuss the questions as they were presented to them and generally exhibited no difficulty in providing immediate responses to questions as they were asked. Excerpts cited from student responses have been documented in the exact language format provided by the participants and were not corrected for grammatical or syntactical errors.

Participant Demographics

Fourteen at-risk fourth grade students from a rural northern California school, ranging in age from nine to eleven years old, participated in this study. All students participating in the study were previously identified as being academically successful in their school experiences yet having one or more at-risk factors. Identified at-risk factors included being a participant in the federal free and reduced school lunch program, being identified as English language learners, living in socio-economically disadvantaged households, having exposure to substance abuse issues within their
families, or having parents/guardians who have not completed their high school education. According to family demographic information collected by the school, none of the respondents have parents/guardians who have completed any higher education coursework. Fifty percent of the participants were European American, and 50% were Latino, which is representative of the school’s overall demographics (51% European American and 49% Latino). Fifty-seven percent of the participants were female, and 48% were male. In the following sections, discoveries made through the data collection process and general themes that emerged from that process are presented.

Themes Revealed in the Data

As was previously stated, all respondents were generally excited about participating in the study, and many expressed that they had been looking forward to participating in the interview session. Most had no difficulty in answering the survey questions, but on a few occasions, various respondents could not provide an answer to a particular question in which case we just moved on to the next question. The condensed data in the following section are divided into generalized topics or themes offering participants’ explanations as to why they feel they are considered to be academically successful students.

Love of learning.

The first question asked of each participant was open-ended and provided an opportunity for students to generalize their feelings about school and offer their
explanations as to why they felt the way they did about their schooling experiences. Of the fourteen students who were asked this question, 79% indicated that in some fashion or another, they enjoyed learning and indicated that learning is fun for them. One male participant stated:

School makes me feel happy because I know that every day, I learn something new. I like to go to school because I know I’m gonna learn something that I can tell my mom and little brother.

A ten-year-old male respondent said:

I love school and want to do good. I know that everything I learn in school will help me go to college when I get older—or help me go into the Marines.

A Latina student replied:

I feel really good about school. I learn a lot and especially like to learn more math. I love school because it’s fun and entertaining and I get to see my friends and play with them at recess. Sometimes when my friends come over to my house, we play school and talk about what we’re learning in our class.

Seventy-eight percent of the participants offered some type of reference regarding their positive feelings toward learning and indicated how important it is to learn in school. Several students stated that learning is fun, and that overall, they enjoy being at school.
Pay attention in class.

A second theme emerged from the research as students were specifically asked why they felt they were successful in school, and what they felt had helped them be so successful in their experiences. Almost all students offered several reasons as to why they felt they were academically successful. Their responses ranged from such answers as being fortunate enough to have had good teachers, having the desire to get good grades, and feeling satisfaction when report cards were presented to parents/guardians that reflected their hard work in school. Seventy-one percent of the participants provided answers that centered around the theme of acknowledging the importance of paying attention in class and being willing to follow all classroom and school rules. In essence, they held the belief that school is not a place for students to mess around or waste their time—which in fact, it is extremely important to make the best use of their time in the academic setting.

When asked to expand on this subject, one ten-year-old girl responded by saying:

I always listen to my teachers and never interrupt them in class. I listen carefully when my teacher gives us directions and am respectful toward her. When she asks us to get quiet, I always do what she says. I think I learn more when I’m paying attention and do what the teacher wants us to do.

Several other students who had similar feelings about listening in class and following directions echoed this theme. Through admonishment from home or by just having an intrinsic sense of how important it is to actually pay attention and be mentally
present while teachers are presenting lessons, the majority of these academically successful students seemed to have an internal sense of just how important their time in the classroom really is. On the flip-side, when participants were asked why they felt some students were not successful in the classroom setting, 86% of them talked about seeing too many students in their classes who do not listen or pay attention to their teachers, or who just do not take their schoolwork seriously. A ten-year-old boy responded by saying:

There are a bunch of kids in my class that don’t pay attention to the teacher. Sometimes they just pretend they’re listening but really, they’re just messing around and then they don’t do the work. A lot of kids don’t do their homework, either. I think it’s because they weren’t listening when the teacher was talking so they don’t know how to do it, or they just don’t care about getting good grades.

Fifty percent of the students questioned referred to the fact that they take time to study at home, but they felt that unsuccessful students never take the time to study or do not have anyone who is willing to help them get their work completed at home. Another response given by 21% of the respondents revolved around the idea of how some students seem to spend too much time watching TV, playing video games, or wasting their time on social media instead of doing their homework. One nine-year-old girl responded by saying:
I have a lot of friends who watch too much TV or are on Facebook too much. Sometimes when we’re in class, they just sit around and do nothing and don’t even ask the teacher for help.

The general theme of simply paying attention and participating while in school seemed to be very important to these successful students. Even so, this theme went hand-in-hand with the next topic that was fairly prevalent throughout the interview process.

*Family and teacher support is crucial.*

When asked if students had anyone to help them with their schoolwork, 93% of the participants indicated that they had family support when doing homework or had to work on school projects at home. The definition of family support varied from student to student as some singled out one parent or the other, several mentioned having an older sibling who was willing to help, and a few mentioned having extended family members such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents who consistently worked with them at home. Of the 93% who mentioned having someone to help them at home, 77% of those students also referred to the fact that their teachers were willing to help them in class as well as having other school support staff with whom they work (i.e., classroom aides or literacy technicians). One of the boys interviewed had the following to say about getting help with schoolwork at home:
Every day when I get home from school, my mom asks me if I have any homework. If I do, she asks me if I need any help and when I tell her I don’t know how to do the math, she always sits down with me and shows me what I need to do.

This type of response was repeated over and over with minor variations, but the overall theme was very clear in that these successful students had (mostly) adult support with their schoolwork outside of the school setting or knew there was always someone to help when needed.

Along with this theme, participants made many references to the fact that they had teachers who were very willing to offer additional help when needed, or, when they asked for additional clarification on what was being taught, they could count on their teachers to help them. In general, students’ responses indicated that they all had good teachers, but in their opinion, the problem with unsuccessful students was that those students choose not to ask for help when needed or did not care enough to even try to seek out the teacher’s or support staff’s assistance.

It was also clear that many of these successful students exhibited no hesitation in seeking one-to-one help from their teachers if they felt it was necessary to fully comprehend the unit of study or lesson being taught. One particular fourth grade girl said:
I mostly like to do work on my own, but if I don’t get it, I ask one of my friends to help me or I find a partner to work with. If me and my friends still don’t get it, we ask the teacher for extra help.

This same student went on to say:

Sometimes, my teacher’s too busy to help, so she has us work with one of the parent volunteers instead. A lot of times, my teacher comes by later and checks to see if I understand what we’ve been working on.

According to the responses given, students made it very clear that much of their success is due to the fact that they have access to and are willing to seek out additional adult support when they feel it is necessary. The importance of accessing teacher support was an underlying theme carried throughout our conversations, but it was also made clear that these academically successful students have caring and supportive family members who are willing to provide additional aid and truly care about their student’s success at school.

*Makes me do it on my own.*

A fourth theme that arose from this research came as a bit of a surprise to me. Although this theme seemed to be connected to the amount of additional support students were given at home, 93% of the participants indicated that their support providers at home would not “give them the answers to problems” or “tell them what the right answer is.” They indicated that they were forced to discover answers themselves or to solve problems with only guidance provided from their supporters,
but were not just given answers. When referring to receiving help with his math homework, one boy stated:

My dad never gives me the answers. He just shows me how to do it and makes me do the problems on my own. If I get the answer wrong, he shows me how to do it again and makes me do the whole problem over until I get it right.

A fourth grade girl stated:

My mom and dad go over the problems with me and explain how to do it, but they always let me figure out the right answer on my own.

One fourth grade girl who was particularly eloquent stated it this way:

When I bring home my homework, my dad helps me figure out the problems. He gives me an idea of what type of operation I need to use, and then tells me to do it by myself. He usually watches me as I do the problems and lets me know if I’m using the right operation. If I’m doing it wrong, he stops me and shows me again what operation I should be using. If I’m doing it right, he lets me finish the problem and tells me when the answers are correct.

Many of the students indicated that family members do not specifically give them answers to their homework but require them to do as much on their own as possible.

Additional Discoveries

Through the interview process, I discovered that 86% of the participants indicated they intend to go on to college after they complete high school. Seventy-
six percent of those students had a general idea of what type of career they would like to pursue following their college education such as becoming teachers (29%), doctors or dentists (21%), or computer programmers/video game designers (14%). Other careers that were mentioned included becoming a chef, television news reporter, and children’s author, or joining the military. One boy indicated he would like to become a mechanic “like my dad.” One student indicated she was not sure what she wanted to do for a career, but she was certain that she wanted to go to college.

The participants also discussed how caring adults or members of the community might help more students to become successful. Forty-three percent of the participants mentioned that they thought it would be a good idea to have members of the community come to their classrooms and talk about what helped them to become successful in their careers or professions and to discuss what school was like for them. They thought it would be interesting to learn about what successful members of the community were like when they were in school. One student stated, “It would be interesting to hear about what successful people had to do to become successful in their jobs.”

**Summary**

Through one-on-one interviews, I was able to identify clear and distinct practices common to academically successful students who have been recognized as being potentially at-risk for academic and/or social failure. Four common themes
emerged based on students’ perceived impressions of their own academic success. Noted first was a well-defined attitude among most all participants of their love of learning and the importance of learning all that they possibly can of what their teachers are trying to teach them. Participants discussed the importance of listening in class, paying attention, and following school and classroom rules in order to be considered a good student. Participants stressed the importance of having parental/family help at home along with the help provided by supportive teachers to help them gain full understanding of topics and themes they are learning in class. Finally, students felt that it was important that the adults who provide assistance with their schoolwork must be sure to not just give them the answers, but encourage them to make discoveries on their own, eliciting gentle guidance from those who offered the academic support.

Although participant responses had several variations, these stated themes rose to the forefront in defining common traits and characteristics among these academically successful at-risk students. The following chapter presents an analysis of these data.
CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS

Introduction

The question that guided this study was: What common factors or characteristics can be found among academically successful students who are considered to be at-risk of academic or social failure? The responses revealed identifiable characteristics found among successful at-risk students, which I identified and categorized into distinctive themes.

This section provides an analysis of the data collected through one-on-one interviews broken down into the following themes: participants’ perceptions of education, their engagement with caring adults or family members, and participant’s initiative in their own learning process.

Perceptions of Education

Participants in this study were specifically chosen due to their identifiable characteristics of being both academically or socially at-risk and academically successful. The first interview question that attempted to gain insight into how students felt about school in general prompted strikingly similar reactions of a positive or optimistic nature. One student was quick to respond of how much he “loved to learn new things” while another common response given by several of the students was an overwhelmingly positive feeling stating how “learning is fun.” Such reactions indicate the potentially profound nature and simplicity of harboring an overall optimistic attitude about school. The positive connection between
participants’ broad feelings of general contentment with their schooling experiences and documented success is modestly expressed, yet especially significant when considering how important a positive attitude can be in helping to promote success in any situation or setting. The students’ overall combined responses to this question resulted in one of the four main themes discovered in this project; regardless of their association with one or more at-risk factors, successful students seem to understand the importance of learning in the school environment and of maintaining a positive attitude. It could be that schools that are intentionally working to make students’ overall school experiences positive and actively encourage a positive attitude toward school in general may find that more of their students demonstrate academic success.

In many of the participants’ responses about academic success, it appears as though their perceptions and rationale for classmates’ non-success was directly related to their level of attentiveness in the classroom setting. Many of the participants indicated their less successful classmates simply do not listen or pay attention when instruction is offered. It seems as though academically successful students keenly recognize and acknowledge that many of their less successful classmates may be making poor choices in regard to utilizing instructional time to its fullest extent. Conversely, by their responses, there were indications that these less successful students might do much better if they were to consistently change their level of participation or attentiveness in class. It is possible that successful students have an internal awareness that the deliberate attempt to simply pay more attention in
the educational setting may have a significant effect on their academic accomplishments. Unfortunately, less successful students may be lacking in their abilities to attach significance to the importance of using their class time wisely. It is generally accepted that successful classroom management techniques and motivational skills can be taught to students in order to teach them to better monitor their own cognition and attention as well as encourage their levels of motivation in the academic setting. It could be that the achievement gap might be narrowed by overtly teaching these types of skills to those students who simply lack them. It is also possible that successful students have a sense of agency for their own learning. Those who appear to be more academically successful seem to recognize that it is their own agency that contributes to their satisfactory progress and accomplishments in the school setting. It is possible that if students were more frequently exposed to what their real-world consequences will be (both negative and positive) in understanding how their current academic successes or failures can affect them in the future, it might lead to a more concerted effort on the part of less successful students to apply themselves more diligently in their schooling experiences. Additional information regarding students’ perceptions of the school environment will be discussed in the following sections.

**Adult and/or Family Support**

Three of the interview questions attempted to elicit responses regarding the level or amount of family and/or adult support found among the students. There
were seemingly distinct similarities discovered by students’ responses to the overarching theme of having ample adult support with their schoolwork. One student happily replied: “I know my teacher and my mom and dad are always ready to help when I need it.” This type of response was repeatedly mentioned in one form or another. It seems to confirm that there is a strong connection between academic success and students’ access to caring adults who, by their actions, appear to imply their affirmation and willingness to enhance students’ educational experiences by virtue of their support of students’ understanding of their work. It also appears as though much of these students’ academic success stems from their willingness and initiative to simply ask for additional support when needed. Additionally, there are indications that these students are motivated to seek help when they realize supplementary assistance will lead to a deeper understanding of what they are being taught. This can also be a question of timing. When students come to a point in their learning at which they need help to enhance understanding of a specific concept, having immediate, additional adult support can be crucial. If students have to wait until they get home or even until the next day to receive help, they may lose their motivation, preliminary comprehension, or even memory of what they were supposed to be learning in the first place. Students who have ready access to adults or helpful peers when they actually need additional support may have a better chance of learning new concepts and of achieving later academic success.
Responsibility for Learning

Successful students appeared to understand the necessity of making discoveries on their own and grasped the concept that they are truly responsible for their own learning. Almost all of the students who were interviewed for this project described in detail how important it is for them to do the work on their own and not just be given correct answers in order to quickly complete their assignments. It could be that these students have learned to take on the responsibility for their own learning by following the lead and example of their teachers and family members whom they realize truly care for them and are providing support for their academic success.

It is also possible that many of the students’ adult support providers have an understanding of how they may have made mistakes in their own educational experiences and are determined to see their children rise to a level of success higher than their own. Many parents seem to have the desire to have their children achieve greater accomplishments than they themselves were able to achieve. It appears that the students who participated in this study have distinct similarities in the ways their adult support providers interact with them when they are assisting with homework assignments and projects. It could be that many of these adults do not want to see their children end up in similar environmental or socio-economic situations as they find themselves and are possibly doing whatever they feel they can do to help their children be academically successful. Parents and other adults who make a
significant impact in students’ lives may also understand that knowledge gained through active means is more powerful than that gained through passive means. Perhaps there is an understanding among some adults about the complexities of the learning process. They may understand that working with students to help them understand how to do a task on their own task has far more positive implications than just completing the task for them which is not a meaningful learning experience.

**Summary**

The academically successful at-risk students who participated in this research seem to perceive the importance of academic achievement in their own lives, even at such a young age. Their insightful thoughts and attitudes revealed through the interview process regarding their perceptions of success in the school setting and the ways in which that success may eventually translate to future personal success seemed to be quite profound for nine- to eleven-year-old children. Their perspective on the process and importance of learning in the school setting was quite revealing, especially when they noted that current success could relate within the context of their eventual future personal success as they work to become productive citizens in society-at-large. It seems as though these academically successful at-risk students are somehow already preparing themselves for a successful future, even though they are currently in the fourth grade.

It seems as though there are specific characteristics, qualities, and traits of resiliency found among academically successful at-risk students. These factors seem
to help at-risk students succeed in school compared to those who are less successful. It appears that these traits might be used to help less successful at-risk students become more successful in their academic and social growth as well. The at-risk students who participated in this study, despite their adversities, gave insight into what they believe it has taken to help them show academic success. It appears there are explicit steps that can be taken at home and at school to support these students’ success stories.

The next chapter will present some of the limitations of this study, share conclusions of the research, and propose directions for future study.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Students who are considered to be academically and/or socially at-risk due to social and environmental factors beyond their control are sometimes able to rise above their circumstances and demonstrate that in fact, they can experience success. Students who are exposed to certain risk factors are more likely to suffer from the effects of those factors, and often those risk factors prove to have a causal relationship with those students’ identification as being at-risk for academic and/or social failure. Fortunately, there are students who demonstrate a level of resiliency that assists them in their quest to rise above expected destinies or outcomes.

The participants in this study represented a specific and identifiable group of successful students who by all accounts should succumb to the detrimental effects of their exposure to identified risk factors, yet who prevailed over their social and environmental circumstances. Characteristics, traits, and factors associated with these at-risk students’ success have been documented through this study and have shown that exposure to at-risk factors does not necessarily lead to academic failure, and that in fact, some of these students can be just as successful as their counterparts who do not have exposure to at-risk factors. Their ability to experience success seems to be associated with the commonalities and traits demonstrated by their direct contact with positive influences and practices initiated by the caring adults in their lives as well as a seemingly intrinsic nature found among them in knowing and
understanding what needs to be accomplished in order to be considered a successful student.

*Limitations of the Research*

It should be noted that there were several limitations to this research study. First, these results may not necessarily be generalized for all students considered to be at-risk for academic or social failure as this study took place in one school in a rural northern California town.

A second limitation to this study was the relatively small number of students (14) chosen to participate who were selected from an overall population of 54 fourth grade students at the school site. Another possible limitation was the fact that all of the students knew and had previous interactions with me in my role as their school principal and may have been inclined to offer answers to the survey questions of what they thought I was looking for in their answer set.

A third limitation to this study may be associated with the fact that the students’ parents/guardians, other family members, and their teachers were not interviewed. I did not collect data from these individuals, all of whom have a direct impact on the academic success of these students. I would suggest that a separate set of interview questions be developed for the caring adults associated with identified students, and that data be used and incorporated within a similar research study.

Finally, this study was conducted as a master’s thesis to complete a requirement for a Master of Arts Degree in Education. A more intense and thorough
investigation of the related literature would be needed for further study, and a broader study would be needed for a more complete understanding of the factors and traits associated with academically successful at-risk elementary students.

Implications for Future Research

Through this research study, I discovered that most of the successful at-risk students had some type of additional academic support offered to them—most often provided by the caring adults or family members in their lives. I also noted that additional academic support was easily obtainable to the students within a relatively short period of time. This topic could lend itself to future study by taking a closer look at the positive effects of student success afforded through the additional support provided through after-school programs, formalized peer-support groups, or even the introduction of homework hotlines made available to students looking for additional help.

Another implication for future study could revolve around the parents’/guardians’ abilities in tutoring their own children. Parents/guardians or other significant adults in children’s lives might be taught a process of eliciting learning rather than simply handing over correct answers when students are completing their assignments. It might be useful to establish a tutoring clinic for adults at the school site or within the community to ensure that those individuals working with elementary students have the necessary skills to elicit learning from the students with whom they work.
Further implications for future study might be associated with the discovery in this research of the intrinsic nature of the importance of academic and school success found among the participants. Is it possible to significantly narrow the achievement gap by overtly teaching students to monitor their own cognition and attention and even their motivation which might afford them the necessary skills to be able to be more successful in the school setting? Some students seem to have these skills, either because they are innate to them, or they have been taught to them at an early age. Additional research surrounding this topic may lead to further discoveries.

A final topic for additional research involves the discovery through this study that almost all of the participants seemed to have a positive attitude toward school and the learning process. It could be that students who have a positive attitude about school are more likely to be academically successful, but the obverse may hold as well—those who harbor a negative attitude about their schooling experiences are more likely to be academically unsuccessful. At the very least, it would be useful for schools to make the schooling experiences for their students as positive as possible and actively encourage and promote students’ positive attitudes toward school regardless of their association with identifiable at-risk factors.
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APPENDIX A

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

“Thank you for taking the time to help me complete one of the requirements of earning my Master’s Degree in Education from Humboldt State University. Like you, I am also a student. I appreciate your help and input. I have some questions to ask you, and you can skip any if you don’t feel comfortable answering them. At the end of my questions, you will be given an opportunity to give additional comments. If you’re ready, let’s begin.”

1. Overall, how do you feel about school, and why?

2. What about the school day do you especially like?

3. What about the school day do you dislike?

4. Why do you think you do well in school?

5. What has helped you to do well?

6. Does anyone help you with your schoolwork or school projects? If so, who helps you? What specifically does (the person) do to help you with your schoolwork?

7. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If so, how many and what are their ages? What have you learned from them about school?

8. Whom do you first ask for assistance when you need help with your homework? What specifically does (the person) do to help you?

9. Are you planning to attend college after high school?

10. What would like to do when you finish your education?

11. Why do you think some students do poorly in school? What do you think would help those students to do better?

12. What do you think teachers, administrators, staff, and other students can do to help students who are not doing well in school?

13. What do you think caring adults can do to help students do better in school?
14. What can people in our community do to help students do better in school?

15. Do you have any additional comments or have any questions for me?

“Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today. I really appreciate your help!”
APPENDIX B

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT LETTER

April 23, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

As some of you may already know, I am pursuing my Master’s Degree in Education from Humboldt State University. As part of my graduation requirements, I must complete a research project. I intend to conduct a research study to identify common characteristics of successful students at our school, including any factors that promote their success.

I am asking your permission to invite (child’s name) to participate in the study because (he or she) has been identified as being resilient and academically successful in our school.

The interview will take 15 to 20 minutes, will be audio-taped for later analysis, and will focus on what motivates successful students to excel in school. (Child’s name) does not have to answer any questions that (he or she) is not comfortable in answering. (Child’s name) will not receive any compensation for participating in the interview and can end the interview at any time without jeopardy. A copy of the survey questions is included in this letter for your information.

A potential risk to participants includes possible discomfort at being singled out as successful students who are asked to share their strategies for academic success. The possible benefits include an increase in self-esteem at being chosen and the opportunity to share information that could potentially help other students at our school who are less successful.

I will collect no identifying information about your child, and in reporting any comments your child makes, I will use a pseudonym in order to protect (his or her) identity. All information will be kept confidential, and audiotapes of the interviews as well as hard-copy and electronic transcripts of them will be shredded upon completion of the study. All participation is voluntary. I would ask that you review this information with your child and make sure (he or she) is comfortable with completing the interview with me prior to giving your written consent.

If you have any questions or need further information, please do not hesitate to contact my university advisor, Dr. Ann Diver-Stamnes at (707) 826-5822,
If you have questions regarding your child’s rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project, or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you may report them—confidentially, if you wish—to the Dean for Research & Sponsored Programs at Humboldt State University, Dr. Rhea Williamson at Rhea.Williamson@humboldt.edu or (707) 826-4189.

I would really appreciate your help in allowing your child to participate in this study. In order for (child’s name) to participate, I must have your written consent. Please sign below and mail back your response in the provided envelope by May 25. If you prefer, you may drop off the consent form in the school office by delivering it to either Mrs. Walker or me.

Sincerely,

Jeff Northern, Principal
707-725-5726
jnorthern@humboldt.k12.ca.us

Please indicate whether or not you give permission for your child to participate in the research study discussed above. You can mail the consent form directly to me in the enclosed stamped envelope or personally drop it off with either Mrs. Walker or me in the school office. Thank you.

__________________________
Child’s teacher
_______________________________________  Date___________

Parent/Guardian signature
APPENDIX C

STUDENT ASSENT LETTER

Mrs. Teresa Aubuchon, the health aide at our school, will be asked to speak separately to each student invited to participate. Mrs. Aubuchon will state the following.

Before reading the letter:

Mr. Northern is doing some research to find out what makes some students so successful at our school. Your parents/guardians already spoke to you about this, and they have agreed that you can participate in the interview with Mr. Northern. Now we need to make sure you would like to do this so I'm going to read you a letter from Mr. Northern, and if you are interested in being interviewed by him, you can sign the form. If you'd prefer not to, then simply tell me that you don’t want participate.

After reading the letter:

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk about this today.

May 7, 2012

Dear [student’s name],

I am working on a project through the classes I am taking from Humboldt State University. In order for me to finish my class work, I must complete a research project. I would like to conduct a research study that identifies common traits of successful students at our school like you, including any traits that help students to be successful.

Because you have been academically successful at our school, I am asking you to help in the study by agreeing to be interviewed by me. The interview will take 15 to 20 minutes and will focus on what motivates you, as a successful student, to do well in school. If there happens to be a question you’re not comfortable in answering, you can tell me you don’t want to answer it and I will just move on to the next question. It is also OK for you to end the interview at any time if you don’t want to answer any more questions.
I will not use your name in my research, and I want to make sure that you know you will only be participating in the interview if you want to.

If you would like to participate in the interview, I must have your written permission. Please sign this form below if you do want to participate. If you decide you don’t want to participate, you can simply tell Mrs. Aubuchon that you don’t want to be a part of the study and you may go back to class. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,
Mr. Northern

Please sign below if you agree to participate in Mr. Northern’s research study that was just described to you. Thank you.

*******************************************************************************

___Yes, I agree to be interviewed by Mr. Northern and to participate in the study.

_______________________________________   _____________
Student’s signature       Date