Fostering Resilience in At Risk High School Students

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

There is a large volume of literature that discusses the at-risk high school student. This literature tends to focus on the factors that create the at-risk student whether those are environmental factors or perhaps the failure of schools in general that create the at-risk problem in the United States. Although the causes are important to understand, they are obvious. What is missing in the literature is what can be done in a classroom to support change for the at-risk student. A constant issue with many of these at-risk students is their lack of persistence and resilience in an academic setting. There are many theories as to why these students lack the necessary skills of resilience and although that is important contextually, it does not help the high school teacher when given the task to help improve the success rates of these students. High school teachers struggle daily with how to reach their at-risk students and need best practices in a practical approach to help them support these students by building their resiliency.   These best practices can help the teacher of a class that is a self-contained academic support classroom or a teacher who is teaching in a differentiated English or social studies classroom. If the lack of educational resilience is one of the major contributors to why these students struggle in high school then useful, practical strategies to build resilience are necessary tools for the high school teacher.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The bell rings. It is the start of 6th period. Through the door to room 179 walks 15 students who have been classified by their school as at-risk. The at-risk descriptor refers to the idea that these students may be at risk for non graduation from high school. In the classroom is a teacher who understands the social, economic and environmental factors that may be the causes for why these students have been classified in this way, however this teacher lacks the methods to support these students. Each of these 15 students will have different needs and different backgrounds. For some, their skill gap may be in mathematics, for some it may be in reading and comprehension. Regardless of the skill deficit they all lack the ability to work through their frustration when school becomes difficult. How many times has this teacher heard from her group of students, "I don't know how to do it, so I didn't do it," "I am not smart so the teacher doesn't like me so I don't want to ask for help", " This class is dumb, I don't understand it". The teacher wonders if it really is that they don't understand it or is it that they are frustrated and don't want to or can't put in the effort? How much of this giving up is learned behavior? If students can find small pieces of success by working through their frustration, will that transfer to more success in all of their classes? It seems to be a fairly obvious connection. Students who for their entire academic career have been behind lack the skills to problem solve and be resilient with their work. Therefore, would it then make sense to build resiliency with these students and then perhaps their basic academic skills would also improve? The question then arises as to how to teach that type of problem solving? How

do we teach a student to be ok with and to work through their frustrations? The lack or

persistence and resilience with these students can be traced back as fundamental causes

for their at-risk status.

Understanding the causes of this problem of at risk students is important.

However, what is more important and pressing is the need to find practical methods that

can be implemented in a classroom setting. Teachers and schools cannot go home with

the students. Teachers and schools cannot change environmental or societal factors.

Teachers and schools can control what goes on during the school day and within the four

walls of a classroom. There is a pressing need for change in the approach to this problem.

One in four students who start high school in the ninth grade do not graduate. (US Census

Bureau 2010) The opportunity to obtain a viable and sustainable employment decreases

dramatically the fewer the number of years of education a person has attained. Poverty

rates are higher for those lacking a high school degree and in today's rapidly changing

economy there will not be a place for those without skills.

Statement of Problem

What are the best methods and most practical ways to build resilience in at-risk high

school students? At-risk students are those students defined as at-risk for non graduation

from high school. The phrase refers to students who are negatively affected in their

educational performance by environmental, societal, economic, political, and educational

factors (Tidwell & Corona, 1994). Resilience refers to educational resilience and was

defined as "the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal

vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997, p. 2).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the best methods to build resilience to an at risk high school student. Studies, addressed in depth in Chapter 2, illustrate that there is a direct link between student lack of resilience and failure rates in school. Lack of resiliency is a common deficiency in at risk high school students. There are many suggestions and methods for building resilience in these at risk students and the purpose of this research is to examine the best and most practical methods to be used in a self contained classroom that provides support for at-risk students.

Research Question

Are there sound educational methods to build resilience in at risk students? If we understand the connection between the lack of resilience and the at-risk students, then what can teachers do to build persistence in the classroom? Will the acquisition of resilience building skills for the at risk student better their chances of being successful in the completion of high school and beyond?

Theoretical Rationale

In the late 1990s there emerged from the research a field of study known as educational resilience. Educational resilience was defined as "the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997, p. 2).

Research shows there is not one single factor that determines resiliency, but rather, a series of factors and their inter-relationships to the student that deter a negative trajectory for the student.   Additional research by Carol Dweck (2010) in the area of mindfulness supports this idea of the necessity of resiliency and the acquisition of skills. Dweck's research focused on learners who had a fixed mindset and learners who had a growth mindset. Those students who had a fixed mindset lacked the skills necessary to build both their content knowledge and academic skill set as they believed they could not attain higher-level skills. The growth mindset students see the acquiring new skills and content as part of the process. Those with a growth mindset are open to new challenges and are willing to take risks, therefore they are naturally more persistent.

Assumptions

Students in high school that do not perform at grade level, or do not progress to graduate high school, lack resiliency or persistence. Every day I see students who are disengaged. They are not active in the learning as demonstrated by their lack of participation in class. They do not turn in assignments. They tell me that they do not study for tests. They do not see the point, the connection or the relevance of many of the classes they are taking to their lives, to their future.

These students do not feel a sense of urgency as far the need to improve their skills so that, at a minimum, so they may graduate. In reality these are the skills they need to be successful in the future. As the American economy must change to face the

competitiveness of the 21st Century, so must our educational methods. Students who do not complete high school are left behind in the economy. The costs to society are large when large percentages of people do not engage or interact in our economy while at the same time decreasing the number of high school drop outs brings large returns. When the cost of investment to produce a new graduate are taken into account, there is a return of $1.45 to $3.55 for every dollar of investment. (Levin, New York Times, 2012) High school graduates are said to earn 50 percent to 100 percent increase in lifetime income over those who do not graduate and they will be less likely to draw on public money for health care and assistance and be less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. (Levin, New York Times, 2012)

Background and Need

Students need assistance and teachers need strategies to help create a narrowing of the gap between those who graduate and those who do not.   As previously stated, the lack of resiliency is a common factor in the students who are not successful with school.   An understanding of the common traits of at risk students is important however, more important are practical strategies that teachers can use in the classroom that build resiliency and therefore allow students to be more successful.   Marzano, Heflebower and Tammy (2012) provide an in-depth treatment of research-based instructional strategies that are classroom ready. One section of the book deals with the research and theory behind more successful students and schools. Within this section the authors briefly

discuss the importance of educational resiliency and provide brief analysis of the research behind methods that work to support it. All of this is focused within the larger theme of the skills necessary to be successful in the 21st Century. With all of the daily demands on a typical high school teacher it is irrational to think that teachers have the time and or the skill set to support a large population of at risk students. Therefore, a set of simple strategies that might help those at risk students build resiliency and therefore allow them to be more successful in their school experience. Simple, tested and effective strategies that teachers can use with all students in their classes would also lessen the burden on the classroom teacher. As stated previously, volumes have been written about the causes of at risk students. Additional volumes have been written about the impact of large numbers of our students not being adequately prepared to enter the workforce, but little has been written as to a practical set of strategies to try to reach these students.

The work of John Hattie, Professor of Education at the University of Aukland provides context for the need for better skilled teachers in performing these important tasks with the at-risk population. Hattie performed meta study of previous educational research to see what actually was a "game-changer" for students in the classroom. "Game changer" refers to whether or not a new strategy or methodology is effective in the classroom. In Visible Learning (2011) he ranks the strategies and methodologies used in a classroom based on effect size. The effect size of .40 is the baseline. This size of .40 implies what is gained by a student by simply being one year older. Strategies and methods above .40 were seen as having a positive effect on student learning. The list of

the most effective strategies for supporting student learning is a good place to begin the

discussion of strategies for at risk students.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

It was a review of the current literature concerning at risk students that led me to my thesis topic. Initially I had hoped to look for practical classroom methods to build academic skills in my at risk students. However, by reading a vast amount of literature, a small amount in comparison to the amount of literature available on the subject of at risk students, I found a single broad theme. Regardless of the reason the student has been defined at risk, regardless of the color of their skin and regardless of the set of academic skills they enter high school with, they all lack resiliency.

The review of the literature indicated that resiliency, although at times a sub-conscious reaction is a necessary ingredient in the skills a student needs to be successful in school. With additional research there appeared to be two additional common subsets to the theme of resiliency and the lack there-of.

In addition to typical educational journals and digests from the Department of Education, the National Center for Educational Research and countless experts that defined the at-risk student and offered methods to support at risk students I also looked deeper into a second sub-topic on the concept of resiliency as a cognitive study by reading *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement* by David Brooks and *Why Don't Students Like School?* by Willingham (2009) which attempts to answer questions about how the mind works and what it means for the

classroom. The second subset of literature I examined was centered on the theme of building resiliency in the classroom as a way to support at-risk students. The common theme in this literature can best be described by the title of one the articles, "Willing to Play the Game" by Knesting and Waldron (dates) which defines the importance of attitude and resiliency in a student's ability to succeed in playing the game and surviving the system of education. This is also supported by the work of Dweck (2010) and her studies of Mindfulness and the difference in students who have a fixed mind-set and a growth mind-set.

Additionally there is available literature that centers on every day practices of regular classroom teachers and how their actions can build of diminish resiliency. This comes mainly in the area of feedback and grading systems done by teachers who may not even recognize the implications of their practice on a student's resiliency. (Wiliam, 2011). These areas of emphasis in my research; the causes and definitions of at-risk students and the connection to the lack of resiliency, the ways to support these students through building resiliency and the broader idea of cognitive development and behavior to form certain attitudes has given me a broad understanding of the purpose of my research. Each of the themes mentioned above will be developed in more detail in the remaining portions of the literature review.

Historical Context

In 1983 a Nation at Risk was published, a study conducted through the department of education during the Reagan Administration. The findings of this study, were that we were a nation at risk due to our failing school systems and the loss of leadership of American schools in a global world. (Ed.gov/ NatAtRisk)

This 18 month study alarmed Americans as it reported on the failings of the school system and how many students were failing to achieve due to socio-economic and other factors. These students became identified as at-risk students as it pertains to their ability to complete high school. This study, although heavily criticized for being long on conclusions and short on data, (nces.ed.gov) was followed up with a comprehensive follow up study in 1998 by the National Center on Educational Statistics which provided the necessary data to support the ideas of the Nation at Risk study. (nces.ed.gov)

Although the data in that report found that in the 13 years since the initial study many gains had been achieved there was still a persistent problem with the educational attainment of students classified as at-risk. Nationally over 25 percent of the potential high school graduates drop out before graduation. In some major cities the rate is 40 %. (Donnelly, At Risk Students). These statistics and the social, political and economic implications of so many students being unsuccessful in their attempts to complete school has spurred vast amounts of literature on how to deal with the problem of at risk students.

More recently the addition of studies on cognitive behavior and attitudes toward resiliency have connected the two areas of study. At risk students suffer from a lack of resiliency and by building resiliency in students can we in turn improve the outcomes of these students?

Review of the Previous Literature

Cognitive Behavior and Attitudes Toward Success, School and Resiliency
This subset of my research put the idea of resiliency in a broader context. The Social Animal by Brooks and Why Don't Students Like School by Willingham deal with the necessity of resiliency as well as the implications or costs that arise from the lack of resiliency. There is also a common thread in these two works that makes the broader connections between this and our attitudes about success and failure and how that translates in actions in our everyday lives.

Brooks (2011) states that flourishing depends upon unconscious skills that serve as a prerequisite for conscious accomplishment and if there is no unconscious skill then it is harder for an individual to fall into a routine such as work and school. , p 330 need quotation marks at the beginning and end of quote) He creates the analogy of practicing a tennis serve. In addition to practice people need to picture themselves being successful at a tennis serve. If the body impersonates the mind long enough the mind begins to adopt it and success can be found by putting the task at the center, not the personality or the skill. He credits the work of William James with the idea that the mind-set and effort of attention is essential piece in those that have the will and habits to be successful.

Those that can control their attention can control their lives. (Brooks, p 130) In

Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School* is supported by the idea that teachers will

create growth with their students if they begin to praise effort, not ability. He elaborates

on this idea by stating that praising persistence builds persistence and through persistence

comes the other necessary skills to be successful in school. Of equal importance, he

notes that dishonest or shallow praise can be destructive to the growth progress of all

students. (Willingham, p 183) In addition he notes that teachers need to be aware of and

respect a student's content limits and that by pushing too hard on those limits, without

building some level of success at first can cause the student to shut down and actually

regress. (Willingham, p 19)

Strategies

On the surface, the strategies that are proposed as effective by the experts are almost too

simple or obvious. Simple things like the student teacher relationship seem obvious and

straightforward. However, if that is the case, why is that often overlooked as a strategy?

To many teachers. that relationship is a natural circumstance of their behavior in the

classroom, for others, it is a high hurdle to cross.   Many teachers, especially high school

teachers, think of their responsibility as the deliverer of content. However, for many

students there are many things standing in their way when they try to engage with that

content.   In Hattie's meta analysis work (2011) he found that the student teacher

relationship has an effect size of greater than .70 which in his terms would be a

"game changer" for a student in their learning. Additionally, this effect size of greater

than .70 offsets the most common complaint of teacher who work with the at-risk

population and that is of the home-life and socio-economic status of the student. In

Hattie's analysis of the research he found low socio-economic status and a poor home life

to have an effect size of less than .40. Simply put, a positive student teacher relationship

can offset the effect of a student coming from a low socio economic household.

Additional research by Downey (2007) supported the necessity for positive student

teacher relationships for the at risk population. Downey found that a student's

educational resiliency is directly linked to the student teacher relationship. A meaningful

relationship with a positive adult can be the most important contributing factor to success

for an at-risk student. With adults that they trust, students are more willing to ask for

help and that is a necessary factor in building resiliency and trust with the students.

Students who have a positive relationship with their teachers also are more willing to take

constructive criticism and feedback as a way to build their skills and content base.

Another strategy to consider with this population of student is the use of feedback

and formative assessments. Rather than testing once a unit in a summary fashion, it is

important to gauge student learning in small chunks of information. By having small

formative assessments and giving students multiple opportunities to meet the standard set

out in those assessments, teachers can find ways to build resiliency.   Formative

assessments allow for teachers to give specific feedback on an area of content or a

particular skill. By breaking down the knowledge (content) into clear parts, students can

see where they are successful and where they may need additional work. Simply giving a

student a grade of "C" doesn't really tell the student what they know and what they don't

know.   By assessing often, students have the ability to build the skills that are lacking

and then again show what they have learned. Feedback as previously stated, can be both

detrimental and supportive to an at-risk student. By providing targeted and meaningful

feedback specific to these small formative assessments, students can see that although

they may not achieve 100% on the assessment, there are parts that they do in fact

understand and demonstrate competence and there are specific areas that may need just a

bit more effort or development.   This sort of change in assessment may require systemic

changes in the school structure. These systemic changes range from typical grading

scales, how grades are reported and length of time that a student has to demonstrate

understanding of an idea or concept. For example, stand alone support classes for at-risk

students (which I teach) can become more effective is that teacher has a clear

understanding of the skill or task to be emphasized. Teaching skills in isolation and not

grounded in specific content do not connect well to students who struggle as they cannot

transfer those isolated skills to other assignments. (Willingham 2011) Therefore, if

students can receive assistance on specific, necessary tasks then they will gain both

content and skills. These small assessments may also help solve the problem that many

teachers encounter with these students, which is students not able to articulate where they

face frustrations or what they don't understand.   Often the teachers ask, "do you need

help" or "what part of the assignment do you not understand" and often times the

response from the student is, "I don't know, I don't understand any of it". It may also

require a change in the type of support and interventions that we provide to students in a

school setting based on a student's individual needs. Some of these systemic changes are

outlined later in the interview with an expert section.

In classroom support for these students needs to be centered on the ideas of

practice and clarity. In Hattie's meta-analysis he defined teacher clarity as having an

effect size of over .80 which again can be a large "game changer" for the student.

Teacher clarity of expectations is equally important. (Hattie 2011) Setting high standards

should be the norm when working with at risk students as "dumbing down" assignments

and expectations can have catastrophic effects. If high expectations are clearly expressed

then given time, encouragement and support, all students will be able to meet those

expectations. The time is often the most essential piece of the puzzle. We are fortunate

to have a class periods built into students' schedules that provide time and support to

ensure success. Most of the help comes from teacher clarity. If students are confused

about an assignment from a teacher, they feel safe in asking for help from me. I can

provide the teacher clarity that may be missing. I can re-word the assignment, break it

into manageable parts, and assist with organization and other tasks. The students have

the content knowledge to complete the assignment, they perhaps were unclear in what the

assignment was actually asking them to do. Additional teacher clarity can come in the

form of support materials such as video instruction. The Kahn Academy is a good

example of this type of clarity support. Through the web-site www.khanacademy.com

students and teachers can access over 2,600 instructional videos in topics ranging from

basic Algebra to Physics and History (khanacademy.com) The videos are brief and clear

and presented in a manner that is accessible and engaging to students. Often times

students who struggle need to hear information presented in a variety of manners and

from a variety of voices. Finding the time to do that for these students is key in providing

strategies that can help them become more successful. Time to have practiced support is

also essential for a teacher to find success with at-risk students. If students are expected

to "go home" to do the work and have no one that can offer support with the work at

home when the student becomes stuck or confused they will just stop. The lack of

resilience these at-risk students prevent them from being able to work through the

struggle of something challenging. Their first response is to stop and say "I can't do this".

By allowing for practice and work time in the classroom with a teacher present then if the

students have questions they can ask and areas of struggle and confusion can be

addressed. It is almost as though the work that is expected to be done at home needs to

be the easy work that can be completed and therefore build self esteem and resilience and

the work that is hard should be done at school with someone able to provide the support

to get the student through the struggle.

A larger scale or programmatic tactic that can assist the at-risk, non-resilient

student is an eight grade transition to high school program. These programs target many

of the aforementioned concepts. By targeting these students prior to the start of their

ninth grade year, schools and teachers can determine levels of necessary support for these

students. Early detections of gaps for these students allow for the right services to be set

in place by the start of the ninth grade year. By having the right ninth grade and other

high school faculty (those that can easily build positive relationships with these students)

work with these students in the transition program students begin to build that necessary

relationship with their teachers and feel comfortable in their new school setting. The

curriculum of these programs can be both academic and social. For many of these

students, self-advocacy is a skill that is absent. By emphasizing self-advocacy and other

social or soft skills, students will be able to navigate a high school program with more

ease. Curriculum should also be centered on samples of what is considered to be quality

high school work. Often times the expectation of the work produced in high school as

compared to middle school is high and these students need a clear understanding of what

is expected of them. Again, getting this knowledge before high school starts can give

them a solid foundation for success.   Furthermore, researchers have identified the

development of pro social skill as "essential for at-risk students to compensate for risk

factors" (Downey 2007). Lastly, the curriculum in the transition program should also

connect what they are learning in high school to their after high school lives to build a

higher sense of purpose for their learning. Including a high school counselor as part of

the transitions team in a necessity. By showing students different educational paths that

lead to different careers and possibilities in the future will help these often disengaged

students feel more connected by a sense of purpose to their education. Students are more

likely to succeed and build resilience when they see the skills they are learning and necessary survival skills for their future lives. (Downey 2007)

Statistical Information

For statistical information concerning the issue of at risk students I used the California Department of Education's state profile on high school drop outs. I selected this report since I teach in a California high school and most at-risk students in California meet many of the qualifiers for being at-risk such as minority, low socio-economic status and single parent households. I realize this is not a national picture of the problem but it seemed to be a good indicator of the cross-sections of the issues and more relevant to my teaching. The statistics are alarming, but are nothing that we do not already know.

Students in California who are socioeconomically disadvantaged have a graduation rate of only 67.9%. When looking at graduation rates along racial lines, African Americans have a graduation rate of 59% and Hispanics 66%. (California Department of Education, 2011) It was difficult to find cross sectional data that demonstrate the socioeconomic status by ethnicity… the numbers of those that are of low socioeconomic status and a minority.

Special Collections

For a different perspective on the issue of at risk students and high school dropouts I looked at the research that has been conducted through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2006 they produced a special report title The Silent Epidemic-

Perspectives of High School Dropouts. (Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., Morison, 2006). Much of the information included in this report comes from the perspective of high school drop outs themselves.

Of the drop outs surveyed, 47% said they dropped out because school was not interesting, 35% said they quit because they were failing and didn't know how to catch up and 69% said they were not motivated to work hard, and that they did not feel hard work was demanded of them. The more interesting portion of this study dealt with what the students felt they needed to be successful in school. Each of these suggestions; strong connection with at least one adult at school, building a positive school climate that students can engage in either through activities in school or relevant content and improve communication with the parents and greater community are all suggestions that I have seen in many of the research studies I have looked at for my sub topic of strategies and methods.

Interview with an Expert

Sample and Site

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number for the interview with expert___.

Summary of Interview

I interviewed the Superintendent of the Terrywood Union High School District- Lisa Kelly (pseudonym). I selected her because since she arrived in our district (3 years ago) there has been a special focus on closing the achievement gap in our district. With this emphasis on the achievement gap we have designed special programs designed to support at-risk students. In addition and there is emphasis and focus on differentiated instruction within regular academic classrooms. Although I attempted to stay to the questions that I defined in my IRB, the interview turned into more of a conversation about the issue of building resiliency and the larger issue of changing systemically to provide better educational outcomes for all students. We have a good working relationship and she understands my frustrations in working with at-risk students in the current system we have developed in our District.

According to Kelly, if resiliency is missing in by the time that a student arrives in high school, it is not impossible to build, but it needs to be an immediate focus. Academic and literacy skills can be built and developed better once a student has gained some level of resiliency, no matter how small. She stated that one small way to build resiliency in students in the classroom setting was for teachers to show their own vulnerability in the classroom. If no one at home is modeling resilient behavior, then teacher must be ok with admitting mistakes and offering to "try again" or simply say "I

don't know, but I will figure out the answer" often in the classroom. Not only is it good modeling, but it builds an environment where students feel safe to take a risk.

Her professional background and varied experiences formed her opinions on resiliency. She was an English teacher and saw many at risk students in her classroom and all seemed to share the common trait of wanting to not try or try just once and then give up. As a high school administrator, she saw the discipline problems that would arise with at risk students and how those issues of discipline continued to diminish the resilience in these kids. As an Assistant Superintendent and now Superintendent, she sees it more as a systemic problem.

Looking at a traditional high school within a traditional educational system, she discussed the question that is perhaps at the forefront of many administrators' minds; if we have systems in place that may actually contribute to the problems of at risk students. The first example, the traditional, 100-point grading scale is one that is often seen as detrimental to a students' success. With this system and a missing assignment counting for zero points, if a student starts off the year missing a few assignments, have they dug themselves such a hole that they cannot get out of it?

While the emphasis continuing on challenging current, established systems she wondered about instituting the idea of Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum for students. If students can show mastery of a subject and content, then can we move away from the

grading scales that punish at risk kids? Can we build flexibility into the system to give all kids the same content but perhaps different amounts of time to demonstrate mastery? Can there be different paths to prove competence and mastery?

A common place that most at risk students end up in is the traditional summer school where they spend the required number of minutes during the summer repeating an entire course to "pass". Kelly challenged that traditional structure and discussed a structure such as summer school. Should it be a required number of minutes that a student has to sit in a seat to "pass" the class, or can we look at models where teachers decide what is essential for each class and have the pieces that were "missed" during the regular school year be made up during summer school to give credit? She mentioned that it has to be awful for a kid who failed parts of a course to have to sit through an entire repeat of a course during the summer and what did they really gain from that experience?

By looking at flexible ways to prove mastery would that also be a way to also infuse more general skills into the experience for these students? She seemed to have similar beliefs to those of Willingham in his book *Why Don't Students Like School*. Willingham discusses the battle between content and skills and his thesis is different than most in that he believes students need the content and information first and then the skills will follow along, which is counter to most educational theories. Engagement in content builds context and then the skills fall into place through the engagement. Skills independent of content do not necessarily "stick" in the manner that skills taught through

content do. This seems to parallel well with the ideas of Kelly and the Guaranteed and

Viable Curriculum. The essence of this curriculum is to find the essential pieces of

content that are necessary for a student and shed the rest. Content guidelines in the form

of state standards are long and list like and those that support the Guaranteed and Viable

pathway look to pare done the laundry list of "stuff" students need to know to

"understand" United States History. By finding the viable curriculum students have more

time and flexibility to engage with the content and through engaged content, skills can be

developed.

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

The purpose of my research is to examine strategies that build resiliency in the at-risk high school students. This is a non experimental and focuses on a meta analysis of the literature and previous research in this area. Through my research I hope to use previous research and its results to be able build a best practices statement that can be a useful tool for teachers who work with the at risk population in high schools.   Data collected is mixed, qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative data collected is graduation rates and is descriptive statistics such as GPA, class rank and other types. Qualitative data included question and answer survey responses that was given by the students. These survey responses were examined for both common trends and anomalies.

Sample and Site

Participants in the study are my students as a sample of convenience. These students are enrolled in my Academic Workshop classes. Academic Workshop is a self contained class with a maximum of 15 students per section. There are 7 sections offered throughout the day and students are divided into sections based on grade level. I teach one section of 10th and 11th graders and one section of 11th and 12th graders. Students are enrolled either by request from the student or based on recommendations from their counselor or site administrator. Often parents also encourage enrollment into the course. For the 10th-12th graders placement is determined by their current progress at school and for many of my

students they will enroll for multiple semesters. It is important to note that the high

school in which I work is a high achieving, high socio-economic status public high

school and that environment is important to consider when I am discussing the at-risk

population with which I work.

Ethical Standards/Access and Permissions

Students assigned to me in my regular support classroom, and the curriculum did not

change for the purpose of these surveys. The proposal for the survey was approved by

my advisor, and the results are written in a summary report. The confidentiality of all of

the participants was preserved and no identifying information was used.

Data Gathering Strategies

Anonymous survey

Three different surveys were given to my group of students. In the fall of 2011, on the

first day of class students were asked to participate in survey that was designed to

measure their study habits. This was a simple survey that asked the students a series of

questions and their responses to those questions were either; I agree, I disagree or I have

no answer. The second survey was a survey given as a class feedback form at the end of

the first semester. This survey was more reflective in nature where students were given

open-ended questions and asked to respond in a narrative fashion. Lastly, as part of a

larger staff development activity at my school, my students were asked to write down one

thing that went well for them during the semester and or write one thing they appreciated

a teacher doing for them.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

Participants in the study are my students and these students are enrolled in my Academic Workshop classes. Academic Workshop is a self-contained class with a maximum of 15 students per section. There are 7 sections offered throughout the day and students are divided into sections based on grade level. I teach one section of 10th and 11th graders and one section of 11th and 12th graders. Students are enrolled either by request from the student or based on recommendations from their counselor or site administrator. Often times parents also encourage enrollment into the course.

For the 10th-12th graders placement is determined by their current progress at school and for many of my students they will enroll for multiple semesters. It is important to note that the high school in which I work is a high achieving, high socio-economic status public high school and that environment is important to consider when I am discussing the at-risk population with which I work. The surveys and questionnaires I gave to my students served two purposes The first was so that I could get to know the group of students I would be working with in Academic Workshop. I thought that by having information on their study habits, thoughts about school and their levels of success I would be better able to support them in the class. The second purpose was to support my research for this thesis.

Survey one, "How Do You Study?" was taken from James L. Lee and Charles J. Pulvino

in their collection of surveys for students entitled, "Self-Exploration Inventories". This is

a 35-question survey that asks questions about study habits, ability to work through

frustration, habits and likes and dislikes relating school and work. The questions focused

on areas such as time usage, note taking, preparation for exams, reading, organization and

persistence and 15 students (1 class section) participated.   Students responded on a scale

of 1 to 5 with 5 being almost always and 1 being almost never.

Survey two was written by the researcher and another Academic Workshop

teacher at my site. We developed this survey to elicit feedback for the Academic

Workshop class, our teaching strategies and also provide a place for students to do self-

reflection. We believe it is important for kids to think about how they learn, the grades

they receive and to think about whether those grades are valid reflections of what they

know and do. Lastly, we looked for ways to elicit some thoughtful responses for students

to describe how they might improve their own study habits and work ethics to become

more self-sustaining students.   The third survey was written by the Principal of my

school as part of a school wide staff development focus, and he asked that we administer

it in our Academic Workshop classes. As part of a school wide focus on our low

achieving students he asked for students to respond in a narrative to the question of what

had worked well for them this year and what, if anything, had a teacher done to help or

support them.

Overall Findings, Themes

Survey One:

On the first day of class in the fall semester my students participated in a brief survey

entitled, "How Do You Study?" (Lee and Pulvino, 2002).   To keep in line with the focus

of my research, I concentrated on the responses that were related to persistence. There

were 5 questions that asked about persistence or keeping with a task until it was

understood. Of the 15 students who completed the survey 13 answered the persistence

questions with sometimes or rarely. I then looked at the questions that had to do with

organizational skills as that seemed closely related to levels of persistence. Eleven of the

15 students had answers to the organization section as rarely or sometimes.   For the 2-3

students who answered almost always to the questions relating to persistence they also

answered almost always to the questions relating to organization.

Survey Two:

The first part of survey two asked students to be reflective about their previous semester

and to think about the grades they received in their academic classes. If they were happy

with their grades, they were asked what they did for that class that resulted in their grade.

If they were unhappy with the grade they received they were asked to reflect on what

they could do to change their habits to receive a different grade. The results were fairly

consistent amongst all respondents. For students who answered that they were happy or

satisfied with a particular grade they responded that they felt they understood the

expectations of the teacher and the teacher was always very clear in what the assignment

was, how to do it and when it was due. Many (50%+) students also included that they found the class to be interesting and or relevant to their interests. Additionally many students noted that they felt they "liked" the teacher or they found the teacher easy to talk to and interesting.   When asked about the classes where they received a grade that they were unhappy about, they again had similar responses. Many noted that they did not do well because they did not do the homework, they did not study for the tests and a few noted that they did not ask questions about the work in class. What was most striking about these sets of responses was the ownership that many students took for their poor grades. Many stated that they had "slacked off", were not interested in the subject, thought the class to be too hard and was afraid to ask questions. When asked about which of those negative habits they might change to be successful in future semesters, almost all mentioned keeping up with the work and asking questions when things were unclear. When asked about what was most helpful about the Academic Workshop class and how it supported their work in their academic classes the responses were again fairly similar. Many said that it provided them a quite place to do the work they needed to do. Many also stated that there was someone available that they could ask questions of and lastly and most common, many talked about the overall support they received from the Academic Workshop teacher. This included academic and social support, help with assignments and the Academic Workshop teacher knowing what was missing in each of the student's classes and what work was forthcoming. This seemed to be one of the more significant pieces of the relationship. The students felt they always had someone to

"remind them", to "nag them" and to keep them engaged with their work and upcoming tests and or assignments.

Survey Three:

This survey was designed to elicit broad responses and therefore it was difficult to find responses that were specific and common to each other. However, even with the broad nature of the question, there were many common responses that were broad in nature. Responses to the question what has gone well for you this semester were varied. Three students noted that they felt more organized this year than in the past, two wrote about feeling part of the school and the easy time they had making friends. Two other students wrote about a particular class and how it was interesting and three students mentioned they felt they had someone to go to if they needed personal or academic help. Responses to the prompt that asked them to write down one thing they appreciated a teacher doing for them this year were more consistent. Almost all responses contained the following common words or phrases; teacher helped me, let me ask questions, made the class interesting, supported me, and told me what I was supposed to do to get better, kept me on track, and let me talk about struggles.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

Through the research I kept hoping to find some sort of golden nugget or magic strategy that would be instrumental in supporting the at-risk high school student. Knowing going into the research that the common thread of all of these at-risk students is a lack of resiliency, I hoped that there would be some sort of answer from the students as to best support them and this deficiency.   However, the results of my research did not reveal a cure.

What my research did reveal that are some correlations between feelings of being able to stick with a task and feel successful and how that carries over to other areas of academic success. I did however find that what works of special interest to me. It was interesting because what it revealed to me, a 17-year classroom teacher, was that simple and in some cases obvious, strategies may have the best effect on these students. The strategies that seem to be most effective with this group of students is creating a solid student teacher relationship, teacher clarity in assignments and expectations and giving these students time and opportunity to complete their work with support and assistance. With a focus on building resiliency in these students, it appears that there will also be carry over to other facets of their academic success. If students build resiliency, will they also build organizational skills that support their academic success? As they find more academic success, will they build more resiliency, enabling the cycle to continue?

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

The findings of my research were very similar to previous research. My focus tended to be on what can be done in the classroom to support these students whereas most of the previous research also examined the larger causation of at-risk students. Regardless of my myopic focus, the results and findings are in similar. Teacher student relationships, teacher clarity, effective forms of feedback, support systems and flexibility in timing and assessments appeared as solutions in all of the previous research I reviewed. Much of the previous research also looked at larger systemic changes to society as a whole and how that might improve success for these at-risk students. I attempted to keep the focus simple and base it on what I could control within the four walls of my classroom.

Limitations/Gaps in the Study

There were many limitations and gaps within my small study. One of the major limitations was the small sample size that I used. Out of the 3 surveys given to my students, the sample size differed. In the first survey 15 students participated on the first day of school. The timing of that survey may also have limitations, as many of the students did not have a connection to me yet so they may not have been as honest with their responses as they might have been once they felt they could trust me. Another consideration with this survey being given on the first day of school is that all students, even the at-risk students, tend to have a positive attitude on the first day of school and tend to say that they are going to do things differently this year in school. The second

survey came at the end of the semester and we surveyed 65 students, 30 of which were mine. Since I looked at responses to a questionnaire that I did not administer the setting and mood for those students may have been different than in my classroom. Lastly, the final survey again pulled from a larger pool of students (95) and the same issues may have arisen as in the aforementioned situation.

Another limitation to my study may have been the student population. The sample of at-risk students at my school is perhaps not the typical type of at-risk population. The school in which these students attend is a suburban, affluent, high performing public school. The school is 94% Caucasian and has a 99% graduation rate and 95% of the students go on to some sort of post secondary education. The pool of at-risk students at this school (and used in the study) is primarily made up of minority and low socio-economic status students. However, there are a few Caucasian, higher income level students who are identified as at –risk and were also part of the study. This may be a limitation when looking at the results of the surveys and the applications of strategies from previous research as most of that research was based on students who were at schools with large at-risk, minority and low socio-economic status students.

Implications for Future Research

Additional research should be done to examine the impact of being an at-risk student at a high performing school versus the impact of being an at-risk student at a lower performing school. Does it matter that the at-risk student is part of a small population or,

in fact, represent a majority of the population? Does the issue of resiliency differ in a

high achieving environment and if so what implication does that create for the type of

strategies that should be used by the classroom teacher? If the environment is a factor,

then will it be easier to build resiliency and success with students in a high performing

school? Is it actually more difficult for the at-risk student in a high performing school

where they may "stand out" more than in a school where the majority of students are

classified as at-risk?

Overall Significance of the Study/Applications

When students do not graduate high school or leave high school unprepared for the job

market in the 21st Century there are vast and costly implications for society as a whole.

Although No Child Left Behind was controversial and in many cases, not well liked, it

did provide states and school districts with information about the growing gaps in our

educational system. By having standard measures in place it is easier to determine who is

considered to be at-risk for non-graduation from our schools. Once these students are

identified, it is essential to use our resources in the most effective ways; on classroom

strategies that are effective.

On a personal level, the significance of this study is enormous to my daily

practices. Through this research I have learned many things.   The most significant

learned item was something that was fairly simple; the majority of these students lack a

common skill and that skill is resiliency or persistence. The simple idea is extended in

that dealing with this common missing piece in at-risk students it does not require advanced algorithms or high tech methodologies, it just requires good teaching with simple strategies, that to many may seem obvious. In my six years of work with the at-risk high school population I have tried many different strategies and many of those were the latest and greatest methodologies to build resiliency and yet, I kept returning to what worked best. Over those years I tried daily skill builders that were skills taught in isolation of their content. I tried teaching a variety of note taking skills, reading comprehension and writing skills and none were very effective on their own.   I kept searching for some specific answer to my questions, and yet the answer was good teaching. Building a positive relationship with these students is essential. Many of my students refer to me as their mom at school. Although I may nag and push, they realize that I am in fact trying to support them and they respond. Feeling sorry for these students does not achieve anything but empathy can be powerful. The small class size in which I am able to work is essential to provide one on time and an environment where students feel special or not lost in the crowd. These small class sizes also allow for individualized feedback on progress. Effective feedback that is specific to the task at hand builds skills through practice and realizing that for some, small accomplishments are actually significant. Serving as a translator of sorts for these students helps support the known effectiveness of teacher clarity. Many of these students don't do because they don't actually know what it is they are supposed to do. The teaching of skills works for me when I am able to teach the skill as part of an assignment that the students have to

complete. By teaching the skill within the context of the task at hand, and within their content knowledge allows a student to see the purpose of the skill and through that engagement will hopefully build transfer to other applications at well. Beyond the practical academic skills, these students need an advocate and by serving as their advocate they can trust and that trust build resiliency. By being their advocate they know I am there for support and help and they are more willing to buy into what I am asking them to and therefore, willing to work through the frustrations a little bit longer.

Lastly the implications of this research goes beyond just my work with the at-risk population. I also teach Advanced Placement classes in the Social Sciences. What I have come to realize is that the methods that are effective with the at-risk population are also methods that make me a better teacher overall. In this past year I have focused on teacher clarity and feedback as well as the teacher student relationship with my AP students and I have anecdotally, seen an increase in engagement and overall enjoyment of the class and subject. Perhaps sound educational strategies that build resiliency in at risk students can also build resiliency in higher level students as well or perhaps good teaching is good teaching regardless of the population.

About the Author

Ann Tepovich has been teaching high school social studies, and academic support classes for 17 years. She became interested in the research topic of resiliency as she interacted with many students throughout her years of experience.

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