

Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research

The publication of the *American Education Research Association*

Urban Learning, Teaching & Research SIG

June 2024



FROM THE LENS OF URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: FACTORS THAT PROMOTED THEIR ACADEMIC RESILIENCE

William T. Heard, Jr., Ed.D.

Samford University

Mary E. Yakimowski, Ph.D.

Samford University

Abstract

While much has been studied addressing the topic of academic resilience, few researchers have examined adolescent perceptions of the factors that contribute to school success. This qualitative interpretive study explored individual protective factors that can promote academic resilience in urban middle school students. One-on-one interviews (N=20) of students living in one urban setting were conducted. After analysis, the four individual protective factors of positive self-esteem, self-determination, perseverance, and optimism were identified. Implications are recommended, such as offering these adolescents the opportunity to voice their experiences to educational leaders, and further research avenues are suggested.

Keywords: Urban education, academic resilience, adolescents, individual protective factors, resilience

Early adolescence, the period between ages 11 and 14, has been characterized as a critical time of growth and development, when youth often experience many physical, cognitive, and behavioral changes (Blackwell et al., 2007), including a rapid increase in maturity, social relationships, and academic engagement/motivation (Gatz & Kelly, 2018). While Nichols et al. (2016) have offered that early adolescence is a crucial time for positive development, Skinner et al. (2016) shared that how youth adjust to potential setbacks, obstacles, and academic challenges can significantly impact their future performance.

Although child and adolescent resilience have been studied in a variety of contexts (James et al., 2021), the disparities currently affecting the academic performance outcomes of academically resilient middle school students attending urban school settings have continued to capture the nation's attention (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bryan et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2017). According to the US Department of Education [USDOE] (2020), students attending schools in urban settings performed lower than students attending rural or suburban schools on assessments that measure academic proficiency levels in mathematics, science, reading, and writing. Williams et al. (2015) further state that the gap in standardized assessment results between high- and low-income urban students has grown by more than 40% since the 1960s. LaCour and Tissington (2011) and McKenzie (2019) have indicated that, for the first time, more than 50% of the nation's urban public school students come from households below, at, or not far above the poverty line. Many scholars (e.g., Ozden & Atasoy, 2020; Williams et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2019) have indicated that lower socioeconomic status is a predictive or contributing risk factor for future academic performance outcomes in high-risk early adolescents; those residing in urban community settings are more likely to underperform than their more well-off peers. However, despite these alarming statistics, a large percentage of high-achieving students from urban community settings have been successful and become what some researchers refer to as academically resilient (Rojas-Florez, 2015; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2015; Williams & Portman, 2014).

Background

Academic resilience refers to a dynamic developmental process that involves the protective qualities associated with individual students (i.e., internal protective factors) and their environments (i.e., external protective factors) that contribute to the academic success of at-risk students (Luthar et al., 2000). Morales (2010) described academic resilience as the capacity of students to persevere and continue performing at high academic levels despite facing a variety of adversities or risk factors. This construct often goes hand-in-hand with *individual protective factors*, characteristics that work as dynamic mechanisms that help youth balance or manage the adversities to which they are exposed (Rutter, 1985). These characteristics may include optimism (Rojas-Florez, 2015), internal locus of control (Williams et al., 2017), positive self-concept (Fenzel & Richardson, 2019), self-efficacy (Lee et al., 2021), creativity (Lopez-Aymes et al., 2020), a sense of purpose (Malin et al., 2019), perseverance/grit (Usher et al., 2019), autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985), intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Prior researchers have linked such difficulties during the years of early adolescence to multiple risk factors that can result in lower academic performance (Caleon et al., 2017; Rojas-Florez, 2015), increased engagement in risky behavior (Frazier et al., 2014; Moses & Villodas, 2017), and higher risk of dropping out of high school (Langenkamp, 2010; Sanders et al., 2020). In addition, some (e.g., Hopson et al., 2014; Knight et al., 2019) have suggested that the ability to identify and understand the protective factors that contribute to academic resilience in high-achieving middle school students residing in urban settings is critical to their overall growth and development.

Akin and Radford (2018) and Moses and Villodas (2017) have suggested that students who live in (and attend schools in) urban community settings can experience multiple adversities and disparities, which may contribute to their at-risk/high-risk status. While Moses and Villodas (2017) have added that while extensive literature documenting negative future outcomes among youth exists, Moses et al. (2020) and Sanders et al. (2020) have found that a large proportion of urban adolescents exposed to adversity do not experience such outcomes. Nevertheless, limited studies exist among urban adolescents, including ones related to academic experiences (Rojas-Florez, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). While some (e.g., Lopez-

Aymes et al., 2020; Malin et al., 2019) agree about the identified predictors of and variables associated with academic resilience, there is a lack of studies on the protective factors contributing to urban adolescents' positive adjustment to adversity varies and has been long-debated (Lee et al., 2021; Luthar et al., 2000; Rutter, 2012; Werner, 1989).

Purpose of the Study

While researchers such as Bryan et al. (2020) and James et al. (2021) have addressed the topic of academic resilience, few, such as Williams et al. (2017), have examined the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students. Even fewer, such as Rojas-Florez (2015), have examined urban middle school students' perceptions of how these perceived individual protective factors contribute to their academic resilience. Williams and Bryan (2013) suggested that being able to identify and understand the protective factors that contribute to academic resilience and future academic performance outcomes of adolescents from urban settings would be critical for educational leaders (e.g., administrators, school counselors, teachers) to support student's academic growth and development.

Williams et al. (2017) contend that the ability to identify effective educational services that address the needs of urban middle school students would be limited if students' voices remained silent. Such gaps in the existing literature indicate the need to examine further the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students and how such factors might contribute to their academic resilience. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students. Seen through the lens of these students, we aim to obtain detailed descriptions of urban middle school students' perceptions and experiences that pertain to how these perceived protective factors contribute to their academic resilience.

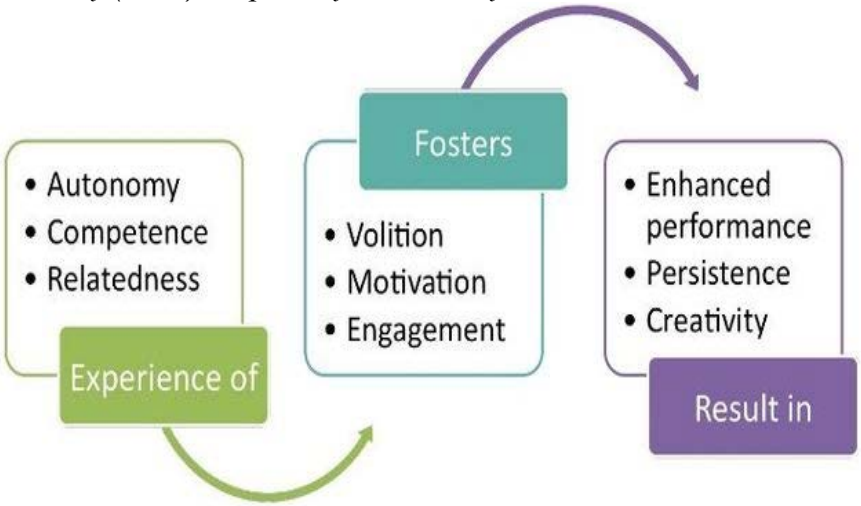
Theoretical Framework

After carefully considering many theories, we decided to use the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework to guide this study. Developed by the psychologists Deci and Ryan (1985),

self-determination refers to an individual's ability to manage themselves effectively, make confident decisions about their future aspirations or life goals, and think autonomously or independently. Self-determination also refers to behaviors that improve one's future circumstances or outcomes, including decision-making, problem-solving, self-instruction, self-regulation, and self-advocacy (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

As shown in Figure 1, SDT is divided into three sections: experience of, fosters, and results in. When the experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness or connectedness are satisfied, this fosters/promotes the individual's volition, motivation, and engagement (Skinner et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2019). In turn, the output of one's volition, motivation, and engagement results in enhanced performance (i.e., higher grades), persistence, or perseverance (i.e., the quality that allows one to continue doing something although it is difficult or is opposed by others), and creativity (i.e., use of one's imagination to create or generate new ideas) (Lee et al., 2021; Lopez-Aymes et al., 2020; Rojas-Florez, 2015). Using the students' lens, we wish to know how they manage themselves effectively, make confident decisions, and think independently, along with their decision-making process, self-regulation, and self-advocacy.

Figure 1
Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Proposed by Deci and Ryan



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Review of Literature

While multiple positive protective factors have been empirically verified as significant predictors of academic resilience in the areas of adverse childhood experiences (Baglivio & Wolff, 2021), child abuse/neglect (Sattler & Font, 2018), racial/ethnic identity (Moses et al., 2020), social-emotional learning (Knight et al., 2019), perceived guidance/support from school staff (Fenzel & Richardson, 2019), school connectedness (Nichols et al., 2016), school engagement (Yu et al., 2019), environmental risk and protective factors (Peters & Woolley, 2015), perceived guidance/support from family or peers (Rojas-Florez, 2015), urban preschool students (Sanders et al., 2020), urban elementary school students (Garcia-Crespo et al., 2021), urban middle school students (Goldstein et al., 2015), urban high school students (Williams & Portman, 2014), and urban poverty (Ozden & Atasoy, 2020), few researchers have examined the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in the lives of urban middle school students as viewed from the lens of students (Rojas-Florez, 2015).

Under the SDT umbrella, a scholarly literature review revealed four recurring or emerging themes related to academic resilience in urban middle school students. The emerging themes identified were resilience, academic resilience, individual protective factors, and urban student perceptions (see Tables 1 and 2 for illustrative studies).

Table 1
Selective Research on Urban Student Perceptions of Academic Resilience Factors

Author(s)/Year	Purpose of Study	Major Findings
Rojas-Florez (2015)	To identify how/which risk and protective factors affect the academic outcomes in high-risk urban middle school students and explore how different family (and individual) environmental factors promote their academic resilience	Multiple family & environmental risk factors negatively affected students; however, many positive protective factors associated with family-promoted academic resilience were identified. The supportive family was found to be the most effective factor.
Hopson et al. (2014)	To examine the effects of how school climate, students' perceptions of social support, and behavior norms within students' homes, schools, and neighborhoods contributed to students' academic performance outcomes	Students received higher grades and exhibited better behavior in school when multiple protective factors were present. The students receiving more support from neighbors had

		higher grades than those receiving less support from neighbors.
James et al. (2021)	To examine factors identifying African Americans as evident resilient (high-achieving) or emergent resilient (low-achieving) and compare students' perceptions of how their learning environments within mathematics classrooms promote their academic resilience	Academic self-concept, mathematics anxiety, satisfaction involvement, and future academic aspirations were higher among evident and emergent students. Evident resilient students indicated higher perceptions of their learning environment when compared to emergent learners.
Suizzo et al. (2017)	To examine how a father's warmth (i.e., support) influences the academic performance outcomes of high-risk urban adolescents from low-income families and explore the individual protective factors that contribute to their academic resilience	Low-income fathers affected their students' beliefs about themselves and their future. For females, fathers' warmth promoted optimism and self-determination. For males, fathers' warmth promoted language arts self-efficacy and self-determination.

Urban Student Perceptions of Academic Resilience

Akin and Radford (2018) have suggested that understanding student perceptions and experiences in urban settings should be a critical consideration for all educational leaders. Williams and Portman (2014) add that students' voices give educational leaders unique insight into effectively promoting resilience-based practices among high-risk urban adolescents. Olson and Dweck (2008) contended that academic adversity determines students' future academic outcomes and their interpretations of those adversities. While studies such as one by Rojas-Florez (2015) focused on academic resilience and found that risk and protective factors can directly affect students' ability to develop academic resilience, students' perceptions of feeling close or attached to others (e.g., family) have been found to promote academic success in urban middle school students (Hopson et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2015).

Rojas-Florez (2015) enumerated several environmental factors associated with family that promotes academic resilience in students, such as low family stress, positive parent-child relationships, effective parenting skills, access to community role models, high expectations, family guidance/support, and respectful communication. Similarly, Hopson et al. (2014) found that students received higher grades and exhibited more positive behavior when supportive relationships and school norms promoting safe,

prosocial behaviors were present. Hopson et al. further indicated that students who perceived themselves as receiving more social support had significantly higher grades than those who perceived themselves as receiving less social support.

Table 2*Selective Research on Urban Student Perceptions of Individual Protective Factors*

Author(s)/Year	Purpose of Study	Major Findings
Rojas-Florez (2015)	To identify how and which individual protective factors affect the academic outcomes in high-risk, urban middle school students and explore how different individual protective factors promote academic resilience in high-risk, urban middle school students	Multiple individual protective factors were identified that promoted academic resilience in students, including optimism, empathy, self-esteem, direction/mission, perseverance/grit, problem-solving skills, motivation, self-determination, critical thinking, autonomy, internal locus of control, and purpose.
Ozden & Atasoy (2020)	To examine the family background, school characteristics, and academic-related behaviors of high-and low-achieving African American students to determine what specific protective factors contributed to their academic resilience	Findings revealed that a combination of factors significant contributors to high-achieving students' academic resilience, such as family, school, and individual actions.
Caleon et al. (2017)	To explore the individual protective factors (i.e., personal strengths) and perceived teacher supports that reduced or enhanced the proficiency levels of high-risk, urban middle school students	Multiple predictors were found, including students' backgrounds, personal strengths, and teacher-student relationship/support. Teacher trust was the strongest predictor. Teacher alienation and teacher-student communication were significant positive predictors of student placement in the high-risk group.
Ni et al. (2016)	To examine high-risk urban Chinese middle school students' perceptions of resilience-promoting factors developed in the United States and compare group differences in student perceptions in both countries	High-risk, urban Chinese middle school students scored significantly higher on academic self-determination, self-control, teacher-student relationships, home-school relationships, and peer conflict but scored significantly lower on self-efficacy.

James et al. (2021) compared urban middle school students' perceptions of their learning environments in the classroom to promote their academic success. James et al. report that factors such as academic self-concept, anxiety, satisfaction involvement, and future academic goals/aspirations significantly differed between high-achieving and low-achieving urban students. Suizzo et al. (2017) found that a father's warmth (i.e., support) influenced or contributed to the student's academic success. Suizzo et al. contend that low-income fathers can affect their students' beliefs about themselves and their future

goals and aspirations. These beliefs significantly influence students' academic achievement by increasing their self-determination to continue their education. Regarding female students, a father's warmth promoted optimism and self-determination. A father's warmth for male students promoted language arts self-efficacy and self-determination.

Urban Student Perceptions of Individual Protective Factors

Caleon et al. (2017), Ozden and Atasoy (2020), and Rojas-Florez (2015) are among the researchers who specifically targeted urban middle school students in the examination of individual protective factors. These researchers went beyond identifying a caring or supportive family as an important positive protective factor for urban middle school students. For example, Rojas-Florez (2015) identified multiple positive individual protective factors, including perseverance, optimism, empathy, a sense of direction, critical thinking, motivation, self-esteem, autonomy, self-determination, and purpose. This researcher determined that these factors are a powerful predictor of academic resilience in middle school students living in low-income, marginalized urban communities. Similarly, Ozden and Atasoy (2020) found that academic resilience sources for urban middle school students included multiple personal strengths or characteristics (i.e., individual protective factors). These sources or factors include intrinsic motivation, commitment, self-confidence, and self-management, as mentioned by our theoretical framework.

Caleon et al. (2017) explored the individual protective factors of middle school students and perceived teacher supports that can reduce or enhance proficiency levels in students. These researchers indicated that teacher trust is the strongest/most stable predictor of status among students. In contrast, teacher alienation and teacher-student communication positively influenced students' placement in the high-risk group.

So, what do US urban middle school students themselves feel are the individual protective factors that promote their own academic resilience?

Methods

We used a qualitative interpretive study to explore the protective factors promoting academic resilience in urban middle school students. Specifically, looking through the lens of middle schoolers, we were most interested in which individual protective factors they possessed and how each contributed to academic resilience. While Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that a qualitative inquiry process allows for a specific population to be studied in order for researchers to gain an understanding of issues experienced within the context of their natural settings, Thorne (2016) contends that an interpretive description can provide an “integrative description of a phenomenon of applied or practice interest and do so in a manner in which the disciplinary objects of the study are made explicit within the interpretations” (p. 83). Thorne’s recommendations of key aspects of these studies are that they occur in participants’ natural settings, capitalize on similarities and individual differences within a shared focus of interest, and acknowledge a socially constructed element of the human experience that cannot be meaningfully separated from its essential nature. All three aspects were present in this study.

Our guiding inquiry was: *From the lens of students, what are the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students?* Specifically, three specific research questions were addressed. From the lens of students: 1) *What are their individual protective factors that promote academic resilience?* 2) *Can any similarities and differences be identified (e.g., by gender)?* 3) *How do these factors contribute to their academic performance outcomes?*

Setting and Sample

The setting was a six-week urban summer program. While a university in Alabama hosted the program, we were not affiliated with this university, the district, or employees of this program. The program participants were all African Americans from one urban district, which generally matched the racial/ethnic composition of that district.

Selected through purposive sampling, each study participant was required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) just promoted to grade 7 or 8, (2) attended the same urban middle school since grade 6, and (3) demonstrated low academic performance before the 2021-2022 school year (i.e., averaging

grades of C or lower), but now demonstrating high academic performance as operationalized as all grades being B and above. This third criterion was used as a proxy of study participants possessing academic resilience.

Procedures, Data Source, and Analysis

There were three orientation meetings during which the study's purpose, student selection criteria, and sign-off for parents/guardians allowing their child's participation were discussed. All parents/guardians were invited to the orientation sessions if their adolescent appeared to meet the eligibility requirements. If the parent/guardian agreed and signed a permission form, the adolescent was put in the potential pool of participating students. We attained the academic records for all those in the pool to validate that each met all criteria.

From the pool of students having signed parent/guardian forms and verifiable criteria, we used stratified (i.e., grade and gender) random sampling with replacement. This would guarantee that the sample would include specific characteristics the researchers wanted (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). If a selected student opted not to participate, another student of the same gender and grade was selected. We asked these adolescents to sign forms if they wished to participate if chosen. It should be noted that no student who was selected refused to participate. Initially, 12 urban middle school students were selected. However, saturation (i.e., through interviewing, the same themes, ideas, opinions, or patterns kept coming out) was not obtained until 20 students were interviewed.

We had aggregated attendance (e.g., the first 20 days, days 20-40, and attendance percentages) and course grades earned in core subjects (e.g., English, mathematics, science, history) for the last two years for each student. The primary data-gathering source was semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The youth interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and then analyzed, whereby conclusions could be drawn.

More specifically, one-on-one interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes and focused on obtaining detailed descriptions of perceptions and experiences of the individual protective factors that can contribute to academic resilience. There were seven structured questions, allowing for follow-ups probes developed

and noted on the interview protocol. All seven questions were developed after reviewing the study's overarching theoretical framework, scholarly literature was reviewed, and alignment with the guiding research question was assured. For example, one question posed was: *What personal strengths or characteristics (i.e., individual protective factors) have helped you keep good grades in school?* Probing questions were added to allow further elaboration of answers or to explain conversation details.

Interviews were held between June 13 and July 12 and lasted 231 minutes, producing 141 transcribed pages. Although 45 minutes were allotted, each session was between 7 and 18 minutes ($M = 12$), producing 5-10 pages ($M = 7$) per interview. Detailed notes of verbal and nonverbal behaviors were taken, and a digital audio recording device (i.e., a smartphone) was used to capture students' interview responses and the subsequent verbatim transcription.

We conducted memoing, open coding, and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Memoing allowed important ideas to be highlighted while we reviewed notes and interviews. Concurrently, we conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis by reading the transcripts multiple times to ensure no pertinent information was overlooked. From there, coding was used, and a thematic analysis was performed.

Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis identifies patterns in data collected during qualitative interviews. Therefore, we read all the interview transcripts, independently and collaboratively coded the transcripts, grouped codes from the transcripts, compared the similarities and differences of codes retrieved from transcripts, and then placed codes into categories, searching for emerging themes incorporating validity techniques (e.g., member checking and memoing).

Throughout the process, we employed multiple strategies to ensure the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of the collected, analyzed, and interpreted data. For example, ethical considerations and assurances used included ensuring the informed consent of each parent/guardian, the permission of the student, and maintaining privacy/confidentiality. The students were given the right to decline to participate, to stop the interview, or to withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. Students could also

refuse to answer any interview questions they did not feel comfortable answering. No student refused. We triple-checked the analyses and may be sure our biases were at bay when we interpreted the results.

Results

Participants

This study consisted initially of 12 and ultimately 20 urban middle school students, upon which saturation was reached. The students were equally divided by grade level (7 and 8) and gender. All students were African American. The average daily attendance of participants was 88.40% during the 2020-2021 school year and increased to 94.45% (+ 6.05) the following year. The average course grade in core subjects was originally 76.50 in English/LA, 76.85 in mathematics, 76.60 in science, and 78.00 in history/SS. The grades increased in all core subjects the next year to 87.30 in English/LA (+10.80), 89.65 in mathematics (+12.80), 87.65 in science (+11.05), and 89.25 in history/SS (+11.25). The average GPA of all students during the 2020-2021 school year was 2.31, which went up to 3.43, a gain of +1.12 (see Table 3).

Table 3*Students' Course Grades in Core Subjects for the Past Two School Years*

	Attend		LA		Math		Sci		SS/His		GPA		Diff
	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	
A	86	89	75	83	81	86	77	89	78	85	2.25	3.00	+0.75
B	100	100	91	89	91	94	76	83	81	93	3.25	3.50	+0.25
C	86	92	82	90	76	93	74	89	80	85	2.50	3.50	+1.00
D	86	97	78	88	79	81	80	89	74	84	2.25	3.00	+0.75
E	83	97	73	80	80	87	81	88	78	82	2.50	3.00	+0.50
F	92	94	72	97	79	99	80	97	86	98	2.50	4.00	+1.50
G	88	96	77	94	79	92	79	96	82	96	2.50	4.00	+1.50
H	88	90	72	90	76	86	70	84	71	91	2.25	3.50	+1.25
I	88	96	84	93	72	92	67	80	78	83	2.00	3.50	+1.50
J	88	90	80	83	74	86	81	90	72	88	2.50	3.25	+0.75
K	88	93	72	86	81	93	79	84	80	84	2.50	3.25	+0.75
L	92	99	77	83	82	92	74	84	84	88	2.25	3.25	+1.00
M	90	94	75	92	80	97	76	82	79	97	2.25	3.75	+1.50
N	90	94	80	92	77	92	79	87	80	95	2.50	3.75	+1.25
O	84	88	70	91	74	90	72	88	75	93	2.00	3.75	+1.75
P	86	92	73	80	77	85	78	84	80	95	2.25	3.25	+1.00
Q	89	97	63	80	53	80	78	92	70	82	1.25	3.25	+2.00
R	90	96	80	91	82	99	78	95	75	92	2.50	4.00	+1.50
S	88	99	79	85	77	94	80	92	77	88	2.25	3.50	+1.25
T	86	96	77	79	67	75	73	80	80	86	2.00	2.50	+0.50
			77	87	73	90	77	88	78	89	2.31	3.43	+1.12

Notes. All class averages are out of 100 possible points. The cumulative GPA scores are based on a 4.0 scale or index. The GPA has been indicated for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. The overall GPA difference indicates an increase or decrease in GPA during the past year. LA represents English. SS (i.e., social science) represents History. Y1 represents the 2020-2021 school year. Y2 represents the 2021-2022 school year. Students noted above A-T were then given a pseudonym name that started with the corresponding letter.

Towards Identifying Four Protective Factors

We independently and collaboratively read all the interview transcripts and coded and recoded the transcripts while searching for emerging themes and all the other steps mentioned earlier. We collectively agreed on 140 selective codes. These codes were then regrouped into 10 categories. These categories were the following: positive mindset, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-motivation, self-determination, persistence, perseverance, resilience, planning the future, and hope for the future. While considering the SDT theoretical frame, these 10 categories were consolidated into four themes using selective coding:

positive self-esteem, self-determination, perseverance, and optimism. We operationalized these themes and found illustrative quotes-

Table 4
Themes Emerging from Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interviews

Theme	Operational Definition	Direct Quote
Positive Self-Esteem	The degree to which the qualities and characteristics in one's self-concept are perceived to be positive	"I'd say being outgoing but also knowing who you are is important."
Self-determination	The ability to manage oneself, make confident decisions about future goals/aspirations, and think autonomously	"I guess if I keep myself determined, I can do it because I want to make the A honor roll."
Perseverance	The ability to pursue a goal or passion over time and stick with it despite obstacles or setbacks	"I ain't going to quit on something. I ain't going to quit on something I know I can do because my dad didn't raise no quitter."
Optimism	The attitude that good things will happen and one's wishes or aims will ultimately be fulfilled. Optimists anticipate positive outcomes and are confident about attaining desired goals	"I'm still here, and I'm still trying to get through it...so I'm getting passing grades and still working on getting to where I want to go."

Positive self-esteem emerged as an individual protective factor the most and was best characterized by student Ashley, who exuded confidence as she explained how she had improved academically and socially. While classmate Lee stated, "I have a positive attitude about the learning environment and want to do well in school." Salim shared, "If you feel good about yourself, it will help a lot." Other instances of positive self-esteem were detected when Faraji stated, "I encourage myself because if I didn't, I would be doing poorly in school." Moreover, Idowu responded:

I like this song by NBA Young Boy, Proud of Myself. When I first joined this camp, I was told I was proud of myself. Nobody can tell me anything at this point because I'm learning more just by being here.

Idowu's eye level was nonverbally consistent, and his tone of voice was interpreted as enthusiastic when describing his positive view of himself and how he feels others view him. His frequent hand gestures (i.e., pointing his fingers at his chest) allowed him to express thoughts/feelings of pride when discussing his ability to keep/maintain good grades in school.

The second factor identified by middle school students was *self-determination*, as evidenced in Christopher's words:

If I don't get good grades in school, I could get kicked off the football team or suspended until my grades come up. So, I want to keep my grades up so I can learn and not miss any practices.

Christopher's facial expressions were interpretive and reflective when discussing when he realized he could be removed from the football team if his grades were not maintained. Similarly, Olivia offered: "I guess if I keep myself determined, I can do good in school because I want to make A honor roll." Olivia's tone of voice was interpreted as excited when explaining her plans to make the A honor roll in the upcoming school year.

Perseverance was another finding, as evidenced by Haki's words: "By telling myself to keep trying and don't give up on it," while this student pumped a clenched fist. Student Quincy boldly declared, "I ain't going to quit on something that I know I can do because my dad didn't raise no quitter." Leo added:

When you have a desire to learn and want to do well in school, it helps... What I mean is that even if the school gets hard, when you have the desire to learn, and you take notes, pay attention, and participate in class, it really helps you retain the information better, and it will help later when you have to take tests and stuff.

The third pervasive finding through the lens of students was *optimism*. Idowu epitomized this finding in this way:

I want to go into business one day, and I'm trying to own a restaurant ... and then a clothing store to make my brand... That's why going to college is important to me. When I get my first

paycheck, I'm going to give some of it to my momma, some to my grandma, and some to my stepdad because they have helped me a lot.

Similarly, Nancy offered:

When I look at something that I want, like going to college, I try to put that in my head. Then, I remind myself to keep my grades up so I can go to that college or university one day.

We found consistencies across genders when examining if we could detect any differences in the responses. A total of 8 or 9 out of the 10 males and females reported positive self-esteem, self-determination, perseverance, and optimism, which were important individual factors in their academic resilience. This pattern was seen in all background characteristics known about these adolescents.

From Student Lens, Contribution by Each Factor

When asked probing questions about how positive self-esteem helps maintain good grades in school, self-independence, strong will, and solid moral bearings came up, which are further associated with the challenges of coding and classifying complex phenomena. Deniza's response characterized this. He confidently stated, "I am not easily influenced. It takes a lot for me to do wrong. I got my mind, and I keep my head on straight." During the interview, Deniza's verbal and nonverbal behavior proved telling. His mood appeared pleasant, and he answered all questions politely, his voice calm. However, he exhibited particular confidence when discussing his academic success. His facial expressions included constant smiling and excitement.

Similarly, in probing questions on self-determination, Philip revealed, "Because you have to have good grades to go to college, and you probably won't make it to the NBA if you don't have good grades or you don't go to college." Another student, Tamasha, shared, "I have struggled in school a lot over the years, but I work hard to keep my grades up. I always try my best to make better grades each year to help me prepare for my future."

When asked to comment on specific characteristics that have helped him significantly, Kahaan stated, "You have to try to do better than your grades last year. Even if you had an F and then made a C, just

keep trying to improve because you have to aim higher to get better in school.” Kahaan’s body language was active as he used repeated hand gestures (e.g., finger-pointing and raising hands with enthusiasm) to express the importance of his views on achieving academic success. When asked how perseverance has helped, Joshua offered, “If you have the urge to learn and you want it, you have to go get it.” Quincy proudly stated, “This school year when I ain’t quit, my grades got better than my 7th-grade year. So, yeah, that’s a great strength right there, not ever quitting.” Quincy then further discussed his academic struggles in the past, though these issues were not school-based, and how he rectified his focus on mathematics during the last school year.

Discussion

Guided by SDT, this qualitative interpretative study aimed to explore the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students. This study targeted students who were currently demonstrating high academic progress compared to previous years in school. We explored the following guiding research question: From the lens of students, what are the individual protective factors that promote academic resilience in urban middle school students? We verified eligibility by examining academic records, which indicated that each student’s attendance, average grade in each course, and cumulative GPA had increased over the previous year. We addressed three specific research questions: 1) What protective factors promote academic resilience? 2) Can any similarities and differences be identified (e.g., by gender)? 3) How do these factors contribute to their academic performance outcomes? Semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 10 male and 10 female students took place. All participants showed increased attendance, course grades in core subjects, and cumulative GPA over the previous year, and the semi-structured, open-ended interviews revealed four recurring themes, all substantiated by direct quotes from students.

Through our qualitative interviews, we found that students communicated four protective factors promoting academic resilience: positive self-esteem, self-determination, perseverance, and optimism. From the lens of students, these factors did this by improving their self-esteem and confidence in their

ability to keep/maintain good grades in school, improving their self-determination and motivation to succeed as they prepare for their future, improving their ability to persevere and not give up or quit when faced with adversity, and improving their optimism about achieving future goals and aspirations. There seemed to be no difference between the perceived factors identified and the contributions of these factors among males or females. However, we discovered that some students did acknowledge that their struggles over the past two years were more severe than others, which led them to work even harder to succeed academically despite difficulties or challenges.

In other words, academically resilient urban middle school students exhibited positive self-esteem and confidence in their ability to maintain good grades in school. They avowed that they are self-determined and motivated to succeed in school as they prepare for their future goals and aspirations. In addition, students affirmed that they understood the importance of perseverance and did not quit when faced with adversity. Similarly, they view themselves as optimistic about achieving their future goals and aspirations.

We can align our five key findings to the extant scholarship and the theoretical foundation of this study. The first key finding revealed that students perceive themselves as having positive self-esteem and confidence in their ability to maintain good grades in school. This finding was consistent with prior research concluding that positive self-image/reflection contributes to students' purpose development and coping during adverse life events (Malin et al., 2019). Akin and Radford (2018) suggest that a learning environment where school staff mirrors the student population by exhibiting positive self-esteem/self-reflection effectively promotes their self-esteem and academic success.

Secondly, adolescents perceive themselves as self-determined and motivated to succeed in school as they prepare for their future goals and aspirations. To put this finding into perspective as it relates to this study's theoretical framework, Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) suggest that all individuals are motivated to grow and change either intrinsically or extrinsically based on the fulfillment of three innate psychological needs. They are autonomy, competence, and relatedness or connectedness. Deci and Ryan conclude that

when these needs are fulfilled, students become motivated, self-determined, and able to attain their highest level of functioning.

Thirdly, students perceive themselves as persevering and do not quit or give up when faced with adversity. Unlike the findings of Usher et al. (2019), who found that perseverance in school did not directly predict urban middle school students' overall academic performance outcomes, this academic resilience study did find a correlation. Our conclusion is evidenced by multiple students sharing their unwillingness to give up or quit when faced with adversity. Prior research by Rojas-Florez (2015) further indicates that urban middle school students exhibiting the strengths or characteristics of perseverance are motivated to succeed academically despite difficulties or challenges.

Fourth, these adolescents were optimistic about achieving their desired future goals and aspirations. This finding is consistent with prior research by Rojas-Florez (2015), who identified optimism as one of many protective factors promoting the academic success of urban middle school students experiencing adverse life events.

Finally, urban middle school students demonstrated that they could improve their overall academic performance despite exposure to adversity if they focused on improvement. All students' attendance and course grades in core subjects increased over the past two years. This increase includes an overall improvement in all students' cumulative GPA. The student experiences are supported by prior studies conducted by researchers (e.g., Fenzel & Richardson, 2019; Gatz & Kelly, 2018).

How did our findings align with SDT? Because all 20 students expressed an intrinsic motivation to grow and change (i.e., keep/maintain good grades in school) despite any adversity, their innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness or connectedness were met. Deci and Ryan (1985) concluded that when these three needs are fulfilled, students become motivated, self-determined, and able to attain their highest level of functioning. Thus, we conclude that the findings of this study are aligned with SDT.

Limitations/Delimitations

We acknowledge that all studies have innate limitations (i.e., factors outside of the researchers' control) and delimitations (i.e., factors within the researchers' control) that can negatively impact this study or compromise the accuracy of the study's results. Limitations included conducting the study during the second year of the concurrent COVID-19 global pandemic, the unknown effects of the lack of some parents/guardians to consent for participation, the relatively small sample size (further restricted to middle school students), and the use of just one urban setting. The lengthy internal review process undertaken resulted in more succinct interview questions posed and necessitated an alternate environment (district vs. summer program).

To control for participant bias, we tried to frame open-ended questions to prevent the participants from simply agreeing or disagreeing, ensured that questions were engaging throughout the interview, and maintained neutrality to avoid influencing the participants' responses.

We tried to control researcher bias despite being urban educators with a combined experience of almost six decades in urban education. Neither of us was employed by this program, the school district where the students attend, nor the university that hosted this program. However, we do have unintended biases. For example, we tend to help others as we grew up living and working in urban communities and have served as school counselors and psychologists. Furthermore, we had the parameter that this study needed to be completed within a designated time limit of two years, even with a lengthy review process.

In order to try to control for researcher bias, we asked general questions first (before moving to specific or sensitive questions), kept interview questions simple, and did not use leading questions that could prompt the participant to respond in favor of a particular assumption. When analyzing transcripts, we made sure that we continually re-evaluated our impressions and responses and ensured that pre-existing assumptions were kept at bay. In self-reflection, though, we determined among other things, that academically resilient urban middle school students exhibited positive self-esteem and confidence in their ability to maintain good grades. Nevertheless, we could not ascertain what schooling helped these

adolescents further develop their mindsets to do this. For instance, was it one teacher or a process in place by a particular middle school?

Implications

This study only involved 20 adolescents in one urban district. As such, generalizations beyond this urban setting should be interpreted cautiously. We offer the following implications, particularly in this setting and similar settings, to three key stakeholder groups: 1) educational leaders, 2) parents/guardians of students, and 3) early adolescents.

The first key stakeholder group that could benefit from this study is educational leaders (e.g., school principals, school counselors, and teachers) in urban community/school settings. This study could provide these educational leaders with a better understanding of these students' perceptions and experiences to create, modify, or improve existing school practices that provide targeted support to these students. For example, school counselors working with early adolescents could be better equipped to identify/understand the daily difficulties and challenges students face and serve their mental health needs. Also, school principals may wish to gather input from these adolescents on what school factors are useful in furthering their academic outcomes. Teachers may consider periodic "check-ins" with adolescents where adults can ask what is working and what can be made better.

Parents/guardians of early adolescents could similarly benefit from this study, especially if they desire to understand better the potential risk and protective factors that promote, contribute to, or hinder their students' academic growth. Perhaps the school would like to offer a few workshops for parents/guardians. Initially, these informational workshops could be geared toward parents/guardians and then expanded to include these adolescents.

Finally, there are implications and benefits for early adolescents residing in urban community settings. For example, teachers, school counselors, or school psychologists can help them to more deeply understand the personal strengths or characteristics that promote or contribute to academic resilience. In addition, the results of this study could help students gain the confidence to feel more comfortable voicing

their perceptions and experiences of what has promoted, contributed, or hindered their ability to achieve academic success in school.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this qualitative study aimed to explore the individual protective factors that can promote academic resilience in urban middle school students through one-on-one interviews and allowed us to contribute to the extant literature, more research is needed. One of the strengths of this study was getting access to the students in an urban setting as they were under 18. However, we now know that we should include some questions to explore how their schooling helped these adolescents further develop their mindsets to improve their grades and how this informed protective factors. A researcher may build a future design by learning and incorporating our self-reflection and design data sources that can assess these missing pieces in this study.

Another limitation noted was that scarce studies exist on middle school urban populations. There are many reasons, including the institutional review board's active approval of parents (and students). As mentioned earlier, our study was limited to 20 middle school participants in a district with many middle schools. Perhaps a researcher can design a study that uses a larger representation of students in an urban community setting, whether within Alabama or elsewhere, to reach a broader audience of academically resilient middle school students. This would allow the researcher to understand better how the topic being studied is viewed in other parts of the social world. While we believe that conducting such a qualitative study has been beneficial as it addresses the existing gaps in the existing literature, it may be beneficial to use other research paradigms to explore this topic further. For example, a longitudinal study could follow urban school students over time. In addition, a mixed-methods study could be useful to assess academic resilience and individual protective factors and be informed by interviews, observations, and interviews.

In US middle schools, we, the researchers and practitioners, need to take a step back and, rather from a deficit perspective, help bring about a more humanizing, affirmative approach to framing why some adolescents make it so that others can learn from these models. This study helped to bring light with the

hope that others will recognize it. Results then could be used by practitioners in establishing characteristics and attributes within urban environments: “the true middle school [that] has been planned and organized to address the developmental and cultural needs of students of ages 10 to 14” (AMLE, 2020).

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.
 - a. What grade were you in this school year?
 - b. What is your favorite academic subject in school?
 - c. How did you do in your classes this school year?
2. What are some of your daily habits or routines that help you focus on learning and keep good grades in school?
 - a. How do these daily habits or routines help you?
 - b. What daily habits or routines help you the most?
3. What activities (both inside and outside of school) help you keep good grades?
 - a. How do these activities help you keep good grades in school?
 - b. What activities do you feel help you the most?
4. What personal difficulties or challenges have you experienced in life, including while in middle school?
 - a. How have these difficulties or challenges affected your grades?
 - b. What difficulties or challenges have affected your grades the most?
5. Who are some of the people who have helped you work through the difficulties or challenges you have experienced?
 - a. How have these people helped you work through these difficulties or challenges?
 - b. Whom do you feel has helped you the most?
6. What are some of the personal strengths or characteristics that have helped you keep good grades in school?
 - a. How do these strengths or characteristics help you keep good grades in school?
 - b. What specific strengths or characteristics have helped you the most?
7. This is my last question. We have been discussing the difficulties and strengths that have affected your ability to keep good grades. Is there anything else you want to add related to what we talked about or has yet to be asked?

Dr. William T. Heard, Jr. is a licensed professional counselor who has served thousands of high-risk children, adolescents, and families in Madison, Marshall, and Montgomery county for nearly thirty years. He has served as a child/adolescent therapist and school counselor in settings that include community mental health, hospital psychiatric, and public school system. He is employed by the Madison County School System and has served as 9th Grade School Counselor of Hazel Green High School since 2004. He specializes in addressing child/adolescent mental health issues and promotes resilience/trauma-focused interventions for those negatively impacted by adverse childhood experience (ACEs). He received a high school diploma in General Studies from Talladega High School ('92), Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology ('96) and Master of Science degree in Counseling ('97) from Alabama State University, and Educational Specialist degree in Counseling Psychology from Alabama A&M University ('00) where he conducted a quantitative study on "The Effects of Anger-Management and Social-Skills Training on High-Risk Adolescents in an Alternative School Setting in Madison County Alabama" (2000). He received a Doctor of Education degree in Educational/Organizational Leadership from Samford University ('22) where he conducted a qualitative interpretive description study on "Individual Protective Factors That Promote Academic Resilience: The Lens of Middle School Students From Urban Settings" (2022). He received Samford University's Most Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award, was featured in its Research and Innovation in Education Publication and has presented at its Fall/Spring Doctoral Institute, the Alabama Association of Professors in Educational Leadership (AAPEL) Spring Conference, and the American Education Research Association (AERA) Spring Conference in Chicago, Illinois in 2023. He is currently conducting a longitudinal study related to his 2022 dissertation study.

Mary E. Yakimowski (she/her) holds a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut and is a professor and director of the Educational and Organizational Leadership doctoral program at Samford University in Alabama. Originally from Boston, Mary has extensive experience working over 20 years of experience as an educational leader in urban districts across three states. She has worked at the CT State Department of Education Council of Chief State School Officers and taught at Johns Hopkins, Virginia Tech, Sacred Heart (CT), and the University of Connecticut. Mary is an expert in urban education, student assessment, program evaluation, strategic planning, accreditation, and facilitating collaborations between districts and higher education. While she enjoys teaching graduate candidates courses on leadership, school improvement, tests and measurement, and research methods, she has also given over 200 presentations at international, national, regional, state, and local conferences. Mary has accomplished a lot in her 40+ years in education

and recognized for numerous awards, including 18 outstanding publications from Division H of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and two from the Connecticut Boards of Education. She has also been honored with a National Center for Education Statistics fellowship and an appointment as a visiting scholar at Johns Hopkins University. In her free time, Mary enjoys musical theater, brass music, traveling, landscaping, and spending time with her cats, Little Kitty and Paw Paw.