Street Smart Resilience: Resilience Education and Bridging the Achievement Gap for At-Risk Youth

By

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Abstract

The study of resilience, an individual’s ability to persevere and thrive in the face of adversity, is redefining how human service workers should deal with the healthy development for all individuals. This is predominantly so in educational contexts, where both policy and research point to the positive effects that resilience education can have on improving the academic success and social development for all students, specifically those labelled “at-risk”. This qualitative research study explores the various backgrounds, pedagogies and insights of three educators with experience in high priority schools within the City of Toronto. Through an in-depth analysis of various academic sources in collaboration with three qualitative interviews, I intend to critically investigate the ways in which middle school educators implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth. As I examine educators’ perspectives with regards to practical intelligence development, asset-based development, and culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, I intend to assess the impact that these pedagogies have on student resiliency, achievement and their psychological, social, and cultural well-being. Analysis of both the related literature and the collected data suggests the importance of considering: teachers’ perceptions, students’ needs, pedagogical programing, and resilience educational pathways, which look to address the process of resiliency development and shaping resilient mindsets. The results of this research should provide practicing educators with accessible strategies that can support the resilient abilities of all students, while ensuring equitable engagement and academic success within all aspects of our students lives.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

As per 2012, approximately 7.8% of Canadian students aged 20-24 had not received their high school diplomas, with many being designated as high school dropouts (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2012). In 2010, The Toronto District School Board conducted a task force in order consider the best possible methods towards closing the achievement gap that exists between students from the dominant culture, who are predominantly white, and “racialized groups” or groups of students who, “may experience social inequities on the basis of their perceived common racial background, colour and/or ethnicity, and who may be subjected to differential treatment in the society and its institutions” (TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force Draft, 2010, p. 3). Various research studies coincide with these findings, indicating that the majority of dropout students are at-risk youths or youths who are at-risk of failing to succeed in school and society, while faltering or becoming disengaged in the face of adversity.

However, not all at-risk youths dropout, fail or become disengaged. Instead they triumph, persevere and become resilient, even though they are constantly confronted and hindered by adverse experiences. Current research has postured that these “resilient” youths have developed protective factors in order to buffer the negative experiences and consequences in their lives (Benard, 2004; Brown et al., 2001; Masten 2001; Ungar, 2008). As educators we need to investigate how to bridge the achievement gap for all students, ensuring that instruction is provided in a way that bolsters the needs of different types of learners, while developing protective factors that will enhance student resilience and development towards becoming successful democratic citizens.
For years, policies and programs attempted to alleviate the deficiencies of at-risk youth by relying on a “risk orientation approach” (Brown et al., 2001, pg. 3). Through this approach, researchers and educators would analyze the common factors that failing students would exhibit and how these “risk factors” could predict who among their students would fail, become violent delinquents, drug abusers, young parents…etc. In order to keep students on the appropriate track for academic success, programs were implemented as a preventative measure to combat at-risk factors that could affect healthy human development, adaptability and achievement. However, this approach failed to improve student achievement and instead harmed students by labeling them as, “at risk, often long before they actually demonstrate failure” (Brown et al., 2001, p. 5).

Research began to lead educators into developing viewpoints that focused on the lifelong development of the whole child with regards to growth and drive. Through in-depth experimental and longitudinal studies, self-righting mechanisms and protective factors began being observed, defined and promoted as the basis for early resilience education by researchers such as Garmezy (1994), Rutter (1979) and Werner (1989). Rutter (1987) explains that such studies provide researchers and educators with the scope that resilience education is, “…a useful way of promoting the well-being of all rather than targeting specific deficiencies found in an at-risk population” (as cited from Brown et al., 2001, p. 14). Because resilience education considers the positive life growth and development of the individual student, strategies can become more explicit, effective and accessible towards improving the education of all students, regardless of risk level or social context.
Purpose of the Study

As educators we take on powerful mentor positions where we can model successful traits and strategies that can positively impact at-risk youth from failing school and bending or breaking in adverse situations. Rockwell (2006) states, “Youth who overcame serious risk factors often report that a teacher, coach, or other adult provided a mentoring relationship that sustained them” (pg. 17). Therefore, educators need to learn and understand the different concepts, strategies and protective factors that foster resiliency within students in order to them development healthy and academically. The purpose of this study is to investigate the pedagogical strategies that educators utilize in promoting the academic and personal development of their students, within a resilience and strength-based framework. At the same time, this study will attempt to uncover how educators reconceptualise their pedagogical practices towards reflecting students’ personal, social, and cultural identities, competences and strengths within the classroom in order to improve engagement and academic achievement.

Educational researchers and teachers recognize the importance of early schooling experiences on later educational outcomes. “Because early adolescence is a period during which many young people are just beginning to engage in risky behaviors and make decisions that can shape their life course, it is also an excellent time to prevent damaging life patterns before they occur and promote a successful developmental trajectory” (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). Therefore, educators need to promote and model for students how to protect and buffer themselves against adverse experiences, which they will constantly experience as they transition and develop into independent, autonomous adolescents. Many past and present day schools use risk-based prevention approaches to help at-risk students avoid drug use, delinquency, violence and
academic failure. However, this approach focuses more on the avoidance or preventing of problems that already exist in these students’ lives or inadvertently label students as being at-risk before they have had the chance to succeed. We need to find ways of fostering resilience pedagogies and approaches in education early, in which students’ strengths are utilized towards lowering dropout rates, improving achievement, and promoting strong intellectual, emotional, communal, and cultural development strategies for all students. As the term “at-risk” is used throughout this study to identify the investigated population of schools and students, it is not the intention of the research to perpetuate the negative label put upon these students who are deemed at-risk. Instead this research will attempt to deconstruct the idea of risk and how to identify students’ strengths rather than their weaknesses, while exploring how resilience can bridge the achievement for all individuals.

**Research Questions**

Current literature has emphasized the importance of resilience pedagogies within education because it reinforces and nurtures the protective factors that ensure the healthy development and achievement for at-risk youth. Therefore, this study will attempt to answer the question: In what ways do intermediate school educators implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth?

This overarching question will be examined through the investigation and analysis of the following four sub-questions:

1. What are educators’ perceptions concerning risk and resilience and what are the various protective factors that contribute to success and resilience for at-risk students?
2. How can resilience strategies be supported pedagogically throughout the classroom and school environment in order to bridge the achievement gap?

3. How might practical intelligence development (tacit knowledge) and “real world” content help support resilience education as a protective factor and improve engagement and success for “at risk” learners?

4. How might pedagogical approaches such as, Asset-Based Development and Cultural Relevant Pedagogy help support student resilience and academic achievement?

Through qualitative research in collaboration with an in-depth review of the literature, I intend to explore how at-risk student resiliency and achievement are bolstered by current pedagogical practices, in the hopes that new strategies can be constructed to advance the achievement for all students and create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment. I also intend to analyze how practical intelligence, asset-based development, and cultural relevant pedagogy can be utilized in order to connect the academic world with students’ personal identities, competences and strengths. I believe this can help foster student engagement, autonomy, self-efficacy and social-emotional development, while bridging the achievement gap, for all students.

**Background of the Researcher**

For a long time I have been interested and concerned about the diverse impact that societal inequalities and barriers have on the development of our institutions, communities, cultures, and selves. As democratic and critical citizens, we are constantly reflecting upon practices to quell discrimination, solidify equal rights, and create equitable and inclusive environments to meet the needs of all. However, even within
these reflective practices lies a dominant discourse and culture, which either purposefully or inadvertently upholds the biases that disadvantage certain groups, while continuing to reproduce the status quo. Education is not immune to the social justice issues that continue to plague our existence due in part to the uniformity and systemic cycle of inequality that our educational institutions maintain. As an educator, my personal philosophy is founded in the critical analysis of how my own practices meet the needs of every individual student, while whole heartedly believing that it is my students’ perspectives, intelligences, and identities that will provide me with the means to help empower them to succeed and break the dominant barriers and deficit perspectives that say that they can’t.

As a student growing up in Scarborough, a hot bed community that consists of various diverse cultures and socioeconomic groups, I have observed a multitude of individual and environmental factors that affect students’ lives every day. A few of my friends, who would have been deemed “at-risk”, struggled with academics in high school and inevitably became disengaged and dropped out. Even to this day, when challenges that require “book smarts” arise, my friends look to those with university degrees, assuming that they are the best ones to solve these types of issues. However, even with my acquired higher learning, I sometimes find myself doubtful of my own abilities and in many situations defer to the opinions and intellects of those same friends who do not consider themselves “book smarts”.

This discrepancy between our perceived intelligences is what drives this study because intelligence is viewed as a means to measure individual differences, especially in student academic success (O’Donnell, 2008). However, intelligence is not easily defined due to the many factors involved and even though, “Intelligence is one of our most prized
possessions…the most intelligent people have not been able to agree on what intelligence is” (Santrock, 2005, p. 144). It is for this reason that I would also like to analyze our understandings of intelligence in collaboration with resilience because this concept of intelligence is ill-defined in schools and, “Students who have…been able to handle school tasks successfully have been deemed intelligent; while those who…have encountered difficulty in school have been judged less intelligent, if not stupid” (Sternberg et al, 1994, p.111). This type of perception and designation will ultimately disrupt school resilience and students’ perceptions of their own ability.

My friends were able to exhibit resilience as they were still able to thrive and become successful even in the face of being labeled at-risk and failing in school. However, because they equated school success to their perceptions of academic and mandatory intelligence, my friends did not see their accomplishments as a sign of their equal ability. Of course, education will provide valuable information that is not easily accessible without componential or contextual intelligence (Gardner et al., 1994), but is this knowledge important for everyone or even presented equitably or inclusively to everyone. I again witness this concept throughout my volunteer experiences and practicum, where students, who were considered disengaged and at-risk of failure in school, excelled in social and practical tasks, like leadership or problems solving situations. I found this to be of great significance within the educational context, where we more often assess students on their ability to progress academically and in the classroom, instead of on their ability to develop socially, creatively or constructively in real-life settings, after all, “Being smart in real-life involves a whole variety of abilities (Lucas & Claxton, 2010, p. 13).
As I entered the Master of Teaching program, I intended to focus my research on understanding how students of differing learning needs and abilities process information in school, how and why students become engaged and succeed, and how practical intelligence, the ability to adapt to demands of the environment (Sternberg et al., 2000), can play a part in their academic development. With this purpose in mind, I was determined to construct an engaging and motivational teaching foundation, where all students, regardless of limitations could develop into successful individuals both inside and outside the classroom. I believe that this goal can best be achieved by acknowledging and integrating into instruction the diverse perspectives, intelligences and resilience factors that student’s exhibit in their day-to-day lives.
Overview

Chapter One includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature. Chapter Three provides the methodology and procedure that was used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. In Chapter Four, I introduce an in-depth analysis of the data. In Chapter Five, I discuss the interpretations and implications of my findings in collaboration with theories and frameworks developed within my literature review. Together, all five chapters contribute to awareness and application of ways in which pedagogical practices can help support at-risk student, resiliency and achievement.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The study of resilience has been ongoing for the better half of the last decade, attempting to uncover and tap into the sources that promote at-risk student success despite the adverse circumstances that entangle many of their lives. Rutter (1979), an early explorer of resilience, believed “The potential for prevention surely lies in increasing our knowledge and understanding of the reason why some children are not damaged by deprivation…” (as cited from Schonert-Reichl, 2008, p. 5). The study of resilience provides a promising framework for all educators who are attempting to facilitate student academic success and growth, while supporting those who are constantly burden by systemic barriers and psychological challenges. In this chapter, I develop a theoretical framework through an in-depth analysis of the literature directly related to the study of resilience. This literature review proposes to examine and identify the various conceptions, factors and characteristics of risk and resilience, while deconstructing different resilience theory frameworks. It will also examine various processes and pedagogical practices related to resiliency development, specifically looking at the psychological and cultural methods of improving student engagement and academic success in the classroom.

Conceptualizing Risk & Resilience

For decades, many psychologists, social workers, counsellors and educators have been attempting to investigate the factors that contribute to the successful development and academic achievement of children and adolescents. Specific focus has been given to at-risk students, youths who have developed in very adverse living conditions or through stressful experiences, who ultimately struggle and dropout of school and follow a
predictable life course leading to undesirable outcomes and failure (Benard, 2004; Brown et al., 2001; Portelli et al., 2007). As Schonert-Reichl (2007) states, “This interest in discerning how children’s early experiences pave the road for later adjustment is spurred, in part, by research that indicates that childhood risk is generally a strong predictor of poor adult outcomes” (p. 4). However, there are at-risk students who beat the odds and survive prolonged exposure from adverse environments, overcoming risk to succeed in school and develop into competent and productive adults. These successful youths are coined to be resilient and if, “the mechanisms and processes by which this occurs could be fully understood, the potential exists to foster resilience through well-diagnosed prevention programs, particularly in major social institutions such as private schools” (Doll, 1998, p. 349).

In order to understand the multitude of frameworks, concepts and processes of resilience education, it is important to break down and define exactly what risk, resilience and resilience education is. There is no universal definition for resilience because it is too multidimensional and context specific, while “we have not adequately understood people’s own culturally determined indicators of resilience” (Ungar et al., 2007, p.288). That being said, it is imperative to analyze the intersectionalities of risk, resilience and student success in order to better assess the various factors, goals and pedagogies involved in fostering resilience within every student.

Though risk discourse originally stemmed from a pathology model looking at how certain factors (cholesterol) predicted someone as being “at-risk” for specific diseases (heart disease), policy makers and researchers began to apply it to the education theater where they, “looked hard at which life factors contributed to young people’s failures to respond to given educational expectations” (Brown et al., 2001, p. 3).
However, these early deficit frameworks within education focused more on the prevention of failure based on pre-determined risk factors that were considered all-encompassing, ill-defined, and separated from individual abilities and contexts.

Ungar (2008) believes, “Risk factors are any individual, family, community, institutional or cultural force that threatens a child’s normal development” (p. 2). However, risk can only imply as to what might happen or signal an increased chance of negative outcomes to occur. Likewise, risk may have very little effect on an individual based on the diverse influential or protective factors that may be elicited from the interconnected complexities of individual strengths, environments, contexts or amount of risk exposure. Thus, the term at-risk has become a very contentious issue as of late, being portrayed as both a negative label that focuses on students’ deficits and as a supportive measure, which is used to appropriate resources to those in need. However, Portelli et al., (2007) argues that “Several decades of educational research have clearly established that ‘students at risk’ is a term that obscures the way in which forms of social difference are treated inequitably in schools. In fact, the discourse of risk has historically served more to mask the sources of educational risk than to reveal them, often relocating the educational effects of racial, cultural, gender, and sexuality marginalization into individual, familial, or community short-comings” (p.1).

It must be emphasized that the dominant culture maintains the status quo and powers of privilege though their construction of the standards against which risk and academic achievement is measure (Portelli et al., 2007). Therefore, those who are different or who do not meet the mainstream expectations around which the education system is organized, fall victim to low educational expectations, disenfranchisement, and a cycle of academic failure. As Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) state, “Historically, ‘at-risk’
students were primarily those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures did not match those of the dominant white culture that schools were designed to serve and support. These students – primarily minorities, the poor and immigrants- were considered culturally or educationally disadvantaged or deprived (as cited from Portelli et al., 2007, p. 9). In order to move away from the deficit, liberal, and official educational discourses of risk, in which we point the finger at the failings of students, families, communities, teachers and the education institution; we must begin to critically assess and deconstruct the “underlying systemic structural conditions [of risk] and identify larger social, economic, political, and cultural dynamics that inform schooling” (Portelli et al., 2007, p.15).

Rutter (1979) Werner (1993), and Garmezy (1994) were among the first in discovering that some youths were succeeding in the face of great risk and that within these students lay protective factors that contributed to satisfactory outcomes, self-righting abilities, and overall success (Rockwell, 2006). Risk and resilience became considered part of the same spectrum, with risk representing the failing or bowing to adverse or negative events and resilience representing the utilization of protective factors to overcome those events. “This change from a focus on risk to one of resiliency represented a paradigm shift from a focus on pathology or disorder to one of strength and success (Schonert-Reichl, 2007, p. 6). This change in mindset from risk prevention towards resilience education and intervention shifted the focus away from trying to predict and solve all the complex disadvantages and negative factors associated with at-risk youth. Instead, it attempted to understand the processes through which we can facilitate affective trajectories in order to guide students towards success and healthy development.
Garmezy & Masten (1991) describe resilience as “a process of, or a capacity for, or the outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging and threatening circumstances (as cited from Schonert-Reichl, 2008, p. 6). Likewise, Ungar (2007) describes resilience in connection with the individual, the environment and the differences in society. His definition is significant to this study because it focuses on how risk and resilience are dictated and developed by the norms and characteristics of its surrounding culture, such as schools. Ungar (2007) states that, “Resilience is, therefore, both a characteristic of the individual child and a quality of that child’s environment which provides the resources necessary for positive development despite adverse circumstances” (p. 288). In other words, resilience reflects the capacity of students to navigate and find the resources they need to persevere and then to negotiate the use of these resources in order to strengthen their will against adverse experiences. Likewise, Brown et al. (2001) defines resilience education as, “...the development of decision-making and affective skills within each person and connectedness between people in the context of a healthy democratic learning community” (p.28). Regardless of the small differences that exist amongst definitions of resilience, Schonert-Reichl (2008) believes that all definitions possess the following four components: “The characteristics of the individual; the nature of the context; the risk factors – the presence of adversity; and the counteracting, protective, and compensatory factors” (p. 6).

The ultimate goal of resilience education is to constantly aid students in the development of their strengths, abilities, skills and interests in the hopes that they cultivate the determination to thrive and to learn. The purpose of this study is to investigate how understandings of risk and resilience are considered as teachers attempt to implement pedagogies that foster resilience and academic achievement.
Resilience Factors & Asset-Based Development

Through a comprehensive analysis of the literature and research, certain characteristics and factors were commonly found within all resilient students. However, it is important to note that these resilience characteristics or factors are typical, ordinary qualities or as Masten (2001) explains, “Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from…normative human resources in minds, brains and bodies from children, in their families and relationships and in their communities” (p. 227). Resilience is inherent in all individuals, a universal capacity that can be forged and developed as long as students receive the appropriate protective factors and practice the skills needed to persevere. Characteristics and factors relating to resilient children are often broken down by specific frameworks; however, resilient students have typically been found to possess attributes that fall under similar categories relating to their personal assets or strengths and their external environments:

The warranting of these factors or assets as being universal characteristics found in resilient students is mirrored by Warner (1989) and Garmezy (1991), two pioneers of the study of resilience who believed that resilience is bolstered by intelligence, temperament and personality characteristics, emotional integration and support within the family, and external support for the child and family (Condly, 2006, p. 216). Masten’s (2006) “short list” adds to the above categories, promoting the idea that these factors “can reflect the fundamental adaptive systems supporting human development” (as cited from Schonert-Reichl, 2007, p. 9). Though her list is broken down into four categories: Child Assets, Family Assets, Community Assets and Cultural Assets; Masten’s list still exemplifies common research characteristics found throughout resilient individuals, such as: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of purpose and future,
family support, peer-adult support, school caring and support, positive expectations, and ongoing opportunities for participation.

Benard (2004) focuses on students’ “Personal Strengths” or Assets and on “Environmental Protective Factors”, which are presented throughout students’ interactions with the family, School, and Community. Benard (2004) maintains that students’ personal strengths, “do not cause resilience but rather are the positive developmental outcomes demonstrating that this innate capacity is engaged” (p. 13). These personal strengths recognize students’ ability towards social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose. Likewise research has demonstrated that regardless of the supports provided by students’ social environments, three environmental protective factors are imperative towards ensuring student resilience (Bernard, 2004). Caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful contribution promote student resiliency across all social contexts; however; each factor is “aspects or components of a dynamic protective process, in which they must work together” (Benard, 2004, p.44).

Though formal intelligence may be a significant asset towards determining resilience and academic achievement, relationships with peers and adults helps the student feel valued and for many students the teacher is the only relatable adult in their lives. O’Neil (1996) states, “The literature on resilient children-those who grow up in the worst circumstances and yet thrive-shows the positive influences of having one caring adult involved in their lives. Oftentimes that caring adult is a teacher” (as cited from Sutherland & Sokal, 2003, p. 25). Benard (2004) emphasizes this point when speaking about at-risk students, where “Studies of school dropouts repeatedly identify the lack of anyone who cared about them as students’ main reasons for leaving school” (p. 69).
However, as previously mentioned, it is important to note that various characteristics work together to foster resilience, while alone they may not provide enough support for students. In understanding this multifaceted and dynamic approach that characteristics have in fostering resilience, it is important to know that, “In general, the more developmental assets youth reported having, the more they were likely to report thriving outcomes, such as school success, good physical health, and overcoming adversity” (Rose, 2006, p. 237).

As explained previously in this chapter, the deficit lens of student risk and development hinders student success, labelling them as less abled than their peers, which in turn elicits low expectations from teachers. Positive psychology and strength-based approaches to education, such as resilience, move away from these deficit lenses and towards an asset-based approach, where we value students’ personal, social and community strengths. Rose (2006) believes that this shift is important with regards to student development because, “Rather than focus on what children and youth cannot do or accomplish, the emphasis is on what they can do” (p.236). Students are much more likely to be engaged when they feel valued, listened to and held to high expectations. Students want to be seen as contributors and participants in both the classroom and greater community, instead of being viewed as at-risk, different, and incapable of achieving. This study will attempt to explore the mindsets that educators have with regards to implementing resilience and other strength-based approaches into the classroom.

**Resilient Models & Frameworks**

As observed from the above findings, resilience is guided and determined by both internal and environmental factors that interplay together in order to mitigate risk factors
How do educators implement strategies or lessons that help to promote these protective characteristics in the classroom, enabling students to learn the skills needed to succeed? A framework approach would be the ideal method for effective integration of resilience education, “However, while such research has identified specific protective factors, a unifying theoretical framework for understanding the circumstantial and personal forces of resiliency in at-risk students is lacking” (Johnson, 1997, p. 37).

This research may provide further insight into what was discussed above, in that resilience education does not follow a linear or homogeneous approach, but instead is constantly developing and dictated by specific individual and environmental risks, assets and contexts.

Luthar and Brown (2007) contend that “Resilience researchers’ central mission is to illuminate processes that significantly mitigate the ill effects of various adverse life conditions as well as those that exacerbate these, and thus to derive specific directions for interventions and social policies” (as cited from Schonert-Reichl, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, resilience frameworks must be created in order to develop comprehensive strategies that can be used to support students, families, schools and the greater community, while critically deconstructing the systemic inequalities that construct risk and enforce the status quo. Schonert-Reichl (2007) believes that resilience education is on the right track in stating, “Indeed, the resilience concept has helped frame the study of child development using a strengths-based model rather than a deficit and problem-oriented approach” (p. 5). Benard (2004) offers a comprehensive framework that connects the research and goals of resilience education with the “profound messages of long-term developmental studies of youth in high-risk environments” (p. 4). When planning for resiliency development, Benard’s framework emphasized four main criteria to follow:
1. Resilience is a capacity all youth have for healthy development and successful learning.

2. Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy developmental and successful learning.

3. Certain characteristics of families, schools, and communities are associated with the development of personal strengths and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning.

4. Changing the life trajectories of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with the changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools, and communities. (p. 4)

As discussed earlier, research by Rutter (1979) Werner (1993), and Garmezy (1994) illustrated the possibility of forming frameworks for resilience by implementing a “person focus approach” that sought to discover the differences that resilient individuals exhibited in contrast to others (Brown et al., 2001). Knight (2007) discusses how the three-dimensional framework of resilience offers a meta-resilience framework that can be applied in different contexts in order to enhance protective factors in the classroom for all students (p. 544). The three-dimension approach focuses on resilience as a state (what is resilience and what does resilience look like?), as a condition (what can I do about it as a teacher?), and as a practice (How will I go about it?). Brown et al. (2001) on the other hand, offer a resilience educational framework that integrates resiliency skills directly into instructional practice. Labelled the “PORT-able approach, teachers focus on authentic active engagement in facing challenges with students (Participation); having students record the experience or challenge (Observation); interpreting of these experiences or challenges (Reflection); and developing the ability to change, shift or adapt to these challenges (Transformation) (Brown et al., 2001).
This framework speaks to the importance of integrating resilience into the instructional practices of all subjects, especially when opportunities to deconstruct challenges arise. This allows each child to apply resilient skills directly to challenging moments, whether they are academic, personal or social. Brown et al. (2001) emphasizes this in stating that, “What is being called for is not a substitution of therapeutic goals for academic ones, but rather, a recognition of the child’s needs, so that a classroom atmosphere might be created in which the child is far better able to satisfy his intellectual needs” (p. 37). This research study will explore how educators attempt to plan, foster, and implement resiliency skills throughout their instructional practice in an attempt to discover a transformative framework for improving resilience and achievement in at-risk students.

**Fostering Resilience**

In order to properly instill resilience education into the minds and lives of young at-risk students, teachers need to understand the definitions, concepts and possibilities for the frameworks that are laid out above. More importantly, in order to cultivate the ideas and concepts of resilience into students, teachers need to model and promote the various positive and confident characteristics of resilience to their students. After all, “schools possess both the capacity and human resources to mobilize many of the protective processes believed to ameliorate risk” (Doll, 1997, p. 357). However, schools need to go even further than just the classroom. In order for resilience education to take hold, schools need to become a motivational and supportive source for children, representing the characteristics and attitudes of resilience to all students, parents and communities. As Ungar states, “the pathways to resilience that youth navigate depend upon the social locations in which culture based negotiations and contextually specific constructions of
health take place” (2007, p. 304). Some of the risks in students’ lives may be unalterable (i.e. poverty, limited family education), but it is important to understand as educators of resilience that, “school success invariably represents an interaction of individual characteristics of children with the characteristics of family, schools, and communities within which children develop” (Doll, 2011, p. 653). Resilience must be implemented constantly in all capacities so that students can visualize and attain academic success, while learning how to traverse the challenging paths that will invariably appear throughout their lives. Resilience education can and must be fostered with peers, teachers, family members and the greater community. Teachers’ need to help students cultivate their own resilient environments by bringing the parents into the framework, ensuring that they know where their children’s risks and strengths lie, and how they can take responsibility in fostering the “at home” relationship as a model to promote resilience and emotional support together (Cassen et al., 2008, p. 78). In order to foster resilience, it is important to create a school environment where students feel welcomed, stable and stimulated. Where students can participate, take ownership of work, visualize achievement and collaborate with friends through engaging extra-curricular activities.

This study will attempt to demonstrate how educators’ model resilience to their students and how the greater school community attempts to showcase resiliency to all stakeholders involved.

**Resilience as a Process**

This study is seeking to explore the influential power that resilience pedagogies have on middle school students and their ability to deal with the various developmental transitions that they are going through. As Gardner et al., (1994) characterize the middle school years as being a, “unique transition from one kind of scholastic environment to
another” (p.111). Santrock (2005) extends this idea in stating that the transitional period, “can be stressful because it occurs simultaneously with many other changes – in the individual, in the family, and in schools” (p. 393). As students develop they will be confronted with new risks and protective factors, which will challenge their ability to stay resilient. It must be understood as resilience educators that, “neither risk nor resilience is absolute, but both fluctuate and change relative to new circumstances and developmental periods of life” (Doll, 1998, p. 358). Likewise, because of this, Doll explains that, “neither adversity nor protective factors are constant but, instead, wax and wane over time (2011, p. 653). Due to the changes in each individual’s developmental process and environment, different experiences of adversity and risk emerge, forcing students to continuously search out new protective characteristics or ways of coping in order to stay resilient.

This idea suggests that, “Resilience is not a permanent state of being, but a condition of becoming better” (Ungar, 2007, p. 301). Resilience is not just something to be learned, but a process that must be entrenched into our cognitions so that we can cope, manage, and persevere against the negative barriers that may come our way. Likewise, resilience education may not present immediate effects, but will plant the protective measures and strengths that the students will utilize, practice or develop further down the road. Cefai (2004) believes this is especially true in the context of schooling because “Resilience is a dynamic process related to changes taking place within the individual’s life and it is context and culture specific. It is a process that can be promoted and enhanced, and social systems such as schools, have a significant role to play in resilience enhancement” (as cited from Knight, 2007, p. 550).
Further research into the effects of resilience education and strategies for implementation should be continued in order to close the achievement gap and ensure that all students receive equitable treatment and the resources they need to succeed. For instance, educational policy makers should look at better methods of integrating resilience education within the curriculum and making resilience education a daily practice, instead of a discrete, single-event occurrence (Doll, 1998). In addition, resilience educational practices should be assessed for their value, to ensure that they are promoting protective factors and strengths, rather than magnifying risk factors through ineffective implementation. Continued research and reflection concerning the resilience process should be committed towards gathering perspective information from present day students in order to formulate more effective types of interventions.

Since it is student engagement, perseverance, and success we wish to uphold, it should be necessary “to consider individualized aspects of children’s experiences and to obtain perspectives of their own experiences with family, peers, schools, and neighbourhood that promote resiliency” (Schonert-Reichl, 2007, p. 15). Through interviews with educators, this research study will provide insight into the dynamic processes that teachers must consider when integrating resilient pedagogies into the intermediate classroom. Benard (2004) argues, “Changing the life trajectory of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools and communities” (p.4). This study will shed some light on how teachers consider the process of resilience when educating students and how teachers continuously integrate resilience practice into their teaching pedagogy in order to improve at-risk student development and success.
Practical Intelligence & Resilience

In talking about resilience, Cassen (2008) states, “A number of studies have shown the influence of IQ on academic outcomes as a protective factor facilitating the process of resilience both in children at high risk and universally” (p. 74). Not only does intelligence act as one of the most important protective factors in resilience theory, but it is also the most powerful predictors of academic success (Cassen, 2008; Condy, 2006). Intelligence contributes to students’ resilience because it allows students to understand their environment, distinguish between what is controllable and what is not, and to choose, modify or control their environments (Condy, 2006). This sentiment is mirrored by Gardner et al., (1994), who described school success as relating to achievement of tasks, as well as adaptation to the environment. They state that, “success in school depends as much on the capacities to understand the demands made by the environment of middle school and to adjust to those demands as it does on any particular set of academic competences” (p. 112).

Autonomy (our sense of identity and self-efficacy within the school community), problem solving skills (our ability to solve the challenging tasks within the school setting), and Engagement (how much do we enjoy school), are all affected by our level of intelligence. As Hatt (2007) argues, “Smartness operates as a powerful factor in the education of marginalized students who are often wrongfully left feeling or labeled as incompetent or slow” (p. 148). Much like the traditional deficit framework of resilience previously explained, the failure of the student is attributed to their own weaknesses, rather than the schools inability to provide support. This is detrimental to resilience because it segregates and classifies students, forcing them to disengage from school, and carry their unwanted identity out the school doors back into their social context.
“Children’s engagement or disengagement in institutions, such as schools, depends largely on whether children’s fundamental needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence are being fulfilled (Schonert-Reichl, 2007, p. 14).

However, it is important to recognize that intelligence cannot be simplified through one comprehensive or umbrella term, but that it is made up of various components and interconnecting factors. Gardner et al., (1994) believe that, “What counts as intelligence differs significantly depending upon the context in which one finds oneself and the values that obtain there” (p. 106). Like deficit models of risk, concepts of intelligence are connected to social constructs and measures. In an attempt to define the educational conception of intelligence, Sternberg & Wagner (1986) explain that “Tasks typically found on IQ tests and in the school settings are measures of academic intelligence”. However, as schools are attempting to develop students’ competencies for every context or aspect of their lives, academic intelligence or the, “abstract reasoning required by IQ tests may contribute to real-life projects, but its contribution often turns out to be quite small, compared with a host of other personal skills and attitudes” (Lucan & Claxton, 2010, p. 13).

As evidence, both Sternberg (1986) and Lucas & Claxton (2010) believe that academic intelligence that arises from measure of IQ misses important dimensions of what is means to be intelligent. Sternberg’s Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, proposes three main types of intelligences: analytical, creative and practical (Sternberg, 2012, p. 503). The triarchic theory holds that, “the important facet of intelligence is the capacity to be sensitive to different environments, and to adjust to and/or to shape the contexts within which individuals find themselves” (Gardner et al., 1994, p. 109). Just like resilience,
Gardner et al., (1994) and Sternberg’s (2012) concepts of intelligence relies on one’s ability to adjust or adapt to varying circumstance based on the knowledge that they hold.

Academic intelligence also leads to more praise and rewards, which serves to increase student confidence and attachment to the school community. However, a lower measure of academic intelligence would do the opposite and become more of a risk factor. Students would have trouble explaining or controlling their environments and instead of being praised students, would be labeled as less intelligent, which would constitute another label for those who are potentially already at-risk. The extent of one’s intelligence would affect so many of the characteristics that are normally attributed to protective factors. This is especially true when we look at intelligences that differ from academic intelligence, where “much of conventional education discriminates against people who may be very bright, creatively and practically, but who don’t shine analytically or academically” (Lucas & Claxton, 2010, p.19).

This research study investigates teachers’ beliefs about practical intelligence or as Charlesworth (1976) describes as “behaviour under the control of the cognitive processes and employed toward the solution of problems which challenge the well-being, needs, plans, and survival of the individual” (as cited from Sternberg, 1986, p.52). Practical intelligence incorporates the idea of perseverance, specifically within individuals’ cognitive processes, where students can utilize their real-world knowledge and experiences to solve the problems at hand. It is important to develop students’ practical intelligence so that they can cultivate competencies that directly focus on resilient actions, while at the same time offering students a chance to practice solving real-world or relevant problems within the classroom.
Sternberg & Wagner (1986, 1990) propose that “street smarts” or in other terms the “facile acquisition of tacit knowledge” (p. 495), is essential towards succeeding in real-world settings. Sternberg (1990) explains that tacit knowledge is “used to describe knowledge that is not explicitly taught or even verbalized, but is necessary for an individual to thrive in an environment” (p.35). Just like resilience education, this idea of tacit knowledge or street smarts focuses on procedural task or knowledge about how to do something, without explicit instruction. As resilience cannot be directly taught, it can be fostered through supportive relationships and experiences that force students to pull from their past knowledge. The benefit of improving students’ tacit knowledge, especially in connection to resilience education, is that it focuses on information that is personally relevant and important to the individual and his lived experiences. Both resilience and tacit knowledge are expandable concepts, abilities that can be constantly improved if practiced.

Practical intelligence and tacit knowledge, breaks down the dominant discourse and culture of what it means to be smart and allows students to regain a sense of identity, which they can excel in and be proud of. Very much like resilience education, street smarts allows students to become, “connected with being able to maneuver through the structures in their lives such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive ‘others’” (Hatt, 2007, p. 154). This addresses the integration of the social context or real-life experiences into the classroom, which is also a factor in resilience education. Hatt (2007) also found that at-risk students relied more heavily on their street smarts, attributed family members as being intelligent because they were street smart, and were able to find a voice again to gain back a sense of control over their lives. All of these factors contribute to the protective factors that represent the foundation of resilience youths.
Graff (2001) argues that, “until street smarts can articulate themselves as intellectual argumentation, they will have limited influence on the public sphere, and the gulf between the world of students and teachers will continue to yawn” (p. 23). Graff (2001) sees the promise, power and identity of street smarts being able to succeed through implemented practices of argumentative discussion. For example, he relates arguments about sports amongst peers to exhibiting street smart intellectualism. However, he also argues that schools view argumentativeness as a form of trouble making and acting out, where he quotes Deborah Meier (1995) as saying that, “schools, in small and unconscious ways, silence…playground intellectuals” (as cited from Graff, 2001, p. 30). By integrating tacit knowledge into the classroom and teaching students how to engage in healthy discourse, at-risk students could gain a new protective factor in fostering resilience, while cultivating a new “hidden intellectualism” that will help encourage success, engagement and school achievement (Graff, 2001). If educators want to engage and improve upon students cognitive processes in the classroom then they need to utilize students’ strengths, developed from what they already know. It is the idea of incorporating what Moll (2008) calls students’ “funds of knowledge”, where students social contexts are seen as relevant to their learning and so “rather than presenting the community as a place to rise above, schools must equip themselves to draw from the knowledge that students bring with them to school - knowledge that is often not in their textbooks but is acquired from the streets, family cultural traditions, youth culture, and the media” (as cited from Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 9). This study will attempt to analyze how teachers utilize students’ practical intelligences in the classroom, specifically looking at pedagogies that apply resilience to students social contexts, relevant experiences, and street smart knowledge.
Culturally Responsive & Relevant Pedagogy and Resilience

Student learning and achievement relies on the teachers’ ability to engage students through meaningful instructional practices, content and resources. Engagement helps ignite students’ curiosity and guides their determination or intrinsic motivation towards wanting to succeed and excel in their pursuits. However, student engagement is often stunted or suppressed by the societal inequalities that often seep into the classroom by means of exclusive instructional practices and content that predominantly reflects the dominant culture perspective. If educators want students to foster resiliency within our classrooms, then we need to cultivate and value their diverse cultural identities by reflecting their background and lives through inclusive pedagogical practices, resources and subject matter.

In order for resilience to flourish amongst students, their lived realities and social identities need to be central to the curriculum. Ladson-Billings believes that incorporating students diverse experiences, perspectives and cultures into pedagogical practices shouldn’t be seen as an original new concept because, “That’s Just Good Teaching” (1995). She identifies this process as “culturally relevant pedagogy” and a “pedagogy of opposition”, which is committed to students’ collective empowerment and “rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). She believes that through this approach, students not only get to choose their path to academic excellence, but begin to value their skills. As teachers utilize students’ cultures as vehicles to traverse those pathways to excellence, students begin to incorporate their skills towards the critiquing of the societal norms and
inequalities that surround them. Through interaction and deep relationship development between teacher, parents, and peers, students begin to value their identities, abilities, and shared experiences. This promotes resilience alongside cultural knowledge and success as they become the “subject rather than the objects of study” (p. 162).

Gay (2002) mirrored this idea of culturally relevant pedagogy, in which she emphasized the need for instructional reforms to be grounded in positive beliefs surrounding the cultural heritages and academic potentialities of students. Gay believes that, “Decontextualizing teaching and learning from the ethnicities and cultures of students minimizes the chances that their achievement potential will ever by fully realized” (2002, p.24). She terms her pedagogical reform “culturally responsive pedagogy” and defines it as using “Cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). She argues that academic knowledge becomes more meaningful, engaging and accessible when it is situated in students lived experiences and frames of references.

Gay (2002) proposes that culturally responsive pedagogy is established through five essential elements: “Developing a knowledge base around cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction” (Gay, 2002, p.106). These elements help develop educational practices that help teachers to better understanding their diverse students in order to better accommodate and support each individual’s needs. It also focuses on fostering caring relationships where classroom communities work collectively towards acknowledging and solving problems of inequality.
Teachers are able to implement the goals of culturally responsive pedagogy and build towards academic success and resilience by focusing on the positive abilities inherent to each individual, validating students’ cultural strengths and providing high expectations. Just as resilience focuses on students’ strengths and assets, Gay (2010) reiterates that, “learning derives from a basis of strength and capability, not weakness and failure” (p. 26). Likewise, educators need to acknowledge diverse individual and cultural learning styles as a means of how students engage in learning, not towards exemplifying their intellectual ability. The critical analysis developed through culturally responsive pedagogy, where teachers model how multicultural ways of thinking connects “prior knowledge with new knowledge, the known with the unknown, and abstractions with lived realities”. This idea reflects an important tenet of resilience education, as well as practical intelligence because students learn how to build upon what they already know and apply these learned strategies towards real-life challenges.

In an effort to consolidate and bridge these two pedagogies, Kugler & West-Burns (2010) develop a comprehensive framework that attempts to incorporate much of the theory and research conducted around culture and classroom instruction. They term their framework “Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy” (CRRP), where “At the core it connects pedagogical practice to high expectations regardless of issues of social identity; it infuses issues of a broadly defined culture and cultural components within the classroom teaching and environment; and engages students in developing questioning of the status quo and critical consciousness” (2010, p. 216). In order to create meaningful and accessible learning for all students, especially at-risk students, CRRP relies on the examination of schools “thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and actions in seven areas: Classroom Climate and Instruction; School Climate; Student Voice and Space; Family/Caregiver-
School Relations; School Leadership; Community Connection; and Professional Development” (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010, p. 217). As demonstrated already, many of these areas focus on the protective and risk factors that impact student resiliency. CRRP is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by utilizing cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. CRRP also utilizes the background knowledge and experiences of students to help inform instructional practices and assessments, while shaping students into autonomous, democratic citizens who can further advocate against societal inequalities within their communities.

As educators move forward towards developing successful, resilient students, we must take into consideration the various identities and inequalities that are reflected from students or the teachers themselves, whether it be their own lived experiences, personal identity or instructional practices. Gay (2002) believes this is important because “Culture strongly influences the attitudes, values, and behaviors that students and teachers bring to the instructional process, it has to likewise be a major determinant of how the problems of underachievement are solved” (p.114).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which middle school teachers implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth. As evidenced, there is long-standing background research in the field of resilience education. This literature review has examined how resilience education is defined, the various factors and assets of resilience, the frameworks of resilience, the methods of fostering resilience in at-risk students, the ongoing process of resilience, and how practical intelligence or culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy can act as a protective factor for resilience education.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study investigating ways in which intermediate school teachers implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth was conducted through a careful analysis of the literature and interviews of intermediate educators. The qualitative data gathered from the interviews reflected current and past practices of three intermediate educators from in and around the city of Toronto, Ontario. Data was collected through face-to-face, audio recorded interviews, which were also transcribed, analyzed and coded by the researcher in an effort to investigate the common themes and concepts uncovered within the literature review and proposed by my research question and sub-questions. The following chapter outlines my methodology for each step in my research process.

Procedure

This study applied semi-structured interviews as the primary means of collecting data (see Appendix A). Tuner (2010) emphasized the importance of interview because they “provide in-depth information about participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic” (p. 754). I conducted three semi-structured, open-ended interviews with teachers who have experience, both past and present, in the intermediate grade levels of high-priority schools. The semi-structured approach was very important for the analysis of this study because it, “allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up” (Turner, 2010, pg. 756). This approach offered the best comprehensive analysis of my participants, providing me with in-depth experiences and viewpoints, which I pursued further through inquiring questions. Gall, Gall, and Borg state that this type of interview process also offers a consistent and unbiased method to
procuring legitimate responses (as cited from Turner, 2010, p.756). First grouping of questions were designed to investigate my participants teaching background, typical teaching environment and understanding of resilience in relation to academic achievement (see Appendix A). My second grouping of questions attempted to investigate how teachers define the concepts of at-risk and resilience, goals for resilience education and factors that impact engagement and achievement (see Appendix A). My third grouping attempted to determine participants’ strategies for resilience integration within instructions, what are the success and benefits, and what effects they had on engagement, achievement, and fostering resilience (see Appendix A). The fourth grouping investigated the different pedagogical practices that teachers implement into their classroom and how they promote resilience. These practices specifically look at the implementation of students’ social contexts, practical intelligence, asset-based development, and culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (see Appendix A). The final grouping assessed my participants’ beliefs in these best practices with regards to their ability to be modelled, ease of implementation, and value (see Appendix A).

Through a phenomenological lens, this research study analyzed the connection between teachers’ pedagogies and their ability to foster resilience and improve upon academic achievement in the at-risk classroom. Creswell (2007) states, “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p.57). This study explored teachers lived experiences and practices within the classroom, while attempting to drum out their conceptualizations of resilience pedagogies and their impact on student academic and personal development. It is hoped that this research will provide insightful strategies that
can improve the phenomenon of at-risk student resiliency and its relationship to the healthy and successful development of all students.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and interpreted by the researcher, looking for emerging themes. After transcribing the interviews, I reread the transcriptions, focusing on key terms, concepts, quotes and interesting points. Data was coded, whereby I highlight specific nodes or common concepts of interest with different colours. Coding provided a systematic process, which ensures that my findings reflect relevant and observed evidence, rather than personal perceptions, feelings and thoughts (Falk, 2005 p.119). Coding nodes helped me formulate specific themes and categories that I then cross-analyzed and compared with themes and concepts from my literature review. This comparison allowed me to develop meaning from my data, consolidate my findings, and promote areas for reflection and future study.

Participants

In this research study, I conducted interviews with 3 educators who have extensive experience teaching and contributing to the education and support of at-risk students within and around the city of Toronto. Participants were selected based on multiple years of experience teaching the intermediate grade levels (Grade 7-9) within high-priority schools or model inner-city schools, urban communities and low SES neighbourhoods, since these were areas associated with high risk factors and resilience education policies. Intermediate educators were preferred for this study because they could provide insight into the lives of at-risk students who are in the midst of adolescent development, where cognitive, behavioural and emotional changes are dictating their academic ability and engagement. In addition to at-risk teaching, participants were selected based on their familiarity with the concepts relating to risk and resilience, as well
as current research or practices within the field of boosting academic achievement for at-risk youths. This was by no means meant to portray the participants as experts within the field of resilience education, but instead showed that they have practical insights and deep understandings towards improving educational pedagogies for at-risk students.

Each participant had over 15 years of experience in educating students who were at-risk, while currently being engaged in three different positions within the educational sphere (academic, administrator, and teacher). This allowed for the analysis of differing perspectives and viewpoints that could be formulated due to having experiences in multiple areas along the education spectrum. With help from two professors at OISE, I was put in touch with an academic within the field of urban education, as well as an administrator and educator from a middle school located in the heart of a high priority, low SES neighbourhood within Toronto’s north end. Throughout this paper, I use pseudonyms when discussing participants in order to protect their confidentiality.

Jim

Jim has been an educator for 33 years, holding positions as a teacher, vice-principal, principal, and program developer and director for various teacher education programs in and around the Greater Toronto Area. Jim has had the opportunity to teach both English and French Immersion classes from grades 2 to 5, as well as intermediate behavioural classes across divergent economic, ethnic, and cultural communities. Jim has also had the opportunity to take on administrative positions; both principal and vice-principal, with the majority of his experience centred in serious socio-economical challenged and marginalized communities, where socio-economic and racial demographic factors played into his experience as an educator. Geared towards student, school, and community asset development and social justice advocacy, Jim’s educational
philosophy is constantly reflected through his development of and involvement in various
teacher education and community based programs, as well as school-wide initiatives,
which look to address the educational challenges found in many of Toronto’s diverse
urban schools.

Jill

Jill has been an educator for 32 years with experience teaching predominantly
grade 7 and 8 students all over the world. After being certified and teaching in Jamaica,
Jill continued her teacher career in the Cayman Islands where she taught through a
specialized drama program. She also taught ESL in various European and African
countries before coming to Canada, specifically Toronto, to teach 8 years ago. For the
last 5 years, Jill has been teaching grades 7 and 8 students in an identified model school
located in a high-risk neighbourhood in the city of Toronto. Jill utilized her past
experiences to develop instructional strategies that teaches student practical applications
of learning and self-advocacy, while preparing them for successful existence in society.
The researcher had the opportunity to observe Jill’s teaching practice of “Restorative
Justice Circles”, where she models social justice ideals through conflict resolution and
community building exercises that focus on building on and valuing each other’s
strengths.

Judy

Judy has been an educator for approximately 17 years, in which she has taught in
various contexts with varying capacities across the city of Toronto. As a teacher, Jill has
taught in both elementary and intermediate schools that reflected diverse neighbourhoods
and student demographics. Jill currently serves as middle school vice-principal, grade 6
to 8, in a high-risk, priority neighbourhood in Toronto’s north end. This is Jill’s third
middle school experience and second as a vice-principal. Through her experiences, Jill has developed an understanding of the multiple barriers that students face in both their academic and social ventures, with key insights with regards to community partnership, risk classification and learning from mistakes. Judy expresses her belief that in order to open up the world for all students, it is imperative for teachers to provide students with resilient messaging and modeling through equitable and inclusive practices.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

While my approach to this study is phenomenological, my data analysis was also situated within the grounded theory approach, in which I was attempting to advance propositions that investigate the causes and processes of resilience and academic achievement within different educational contexts and pedagogies (Creswell, 2013, p.154). The genesis of my data analysis included a mixture of pre-established (a priori) and emergent (a posteriori) themes, which were developed from observed patterns within the literature and transcribed interviews (Wellington, 2000, p.143). This approach produced a more in-depth and comprehensive approach towards data analysis or as Wellington emphasizes, “…is probably the most common and, in my view, the most rational approach to analysing qualitative data” (2000, p. 142).

My interviews questions were based derived from the common themes found throughout the literature review. As I transcribed my interviews, I was constantly making side notes and reflection memos in order to help guide with my future analysis, findings and final discussion. I proceeded to condense and summarize my data into a chart in order to help organize and cross-reference each participant’s answers in relation to each specific question. This allowed me to present my data in a more reliable, efficient and
visually pleasing manner; helping me find comparisons and contradictions in the data, as well as applicable and relevant codes.

In order to substantiate my themes it was necessary to triangulate the multiple forms of data (literature review, research question, transcripts and summary chart) in my analysis, which helped bolster original themes and discover emerging ones because “…trends and themes need to be confirmed in more than one data source to ensure that the findings of a study are not merely happenstance” (Falk, 2005, p.122). Through this triangulating data analysis I was able to cultivate both in vivo and descriptive codes in order to formulate the four themes through which my findings would be based on. The following themes were developed: Teachers’ Perceptions; Students’ Needs and Factors; Pedagogical Theory and Programming; and Resilient Pathways. Each theme also consisted of various sub-themes to provide a more nuanced analysis of the findings.

As a coding tool, I decided to use different coloured highlighters in order to help discern between participants’ statements in relation to each theme and their connecting codes. This data analysis method seemed to be the most appropriate way of visually separating my data, mirroring what Falk suggests “…highlight with the designated colors the words that give you information about the themes of your sub questions or the themes that emerge” (Falk, 2005, 119). In order develop concrete codes and ensure that each code properly categorized or described all possible findings, multiple readings of the data was necessary. This process is necessary and inevitable because “…there is no substitute for initially ‘immersing’ oneself in the data, i.e. hearing or reading it, and re-hearing or re-reading it, over and over again. Gradually, we then begin to make sense of it and begin to categorize and organize it in our own minds.” (Wellington, 2000, p.143)
Ethical Review Procedures

For this study, I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Before commencing the interview I informed participants that they were not obligated to participate in the interview and that at any point they can choose to stop participating, whereby any information collected by me will be destroyed. I then formally asked each participant to read and sign the letter of consent form, prior to the interview process (see Appendix B for the research letter). In the letter, I provided the participant with information regarding the data collection process, how data would be used, and the confidentiality of the information provided. I also reiterated to the participant that if they agreed to participate, their names and the names of their schools will be replaced with pseudonyms.

As I commenced the interviews, I verbally shared the background knowledge of myself and my research topic, explaining that they could also ask clarification questions at any time throughout the interview. I also stated that each participant could refuse to answer any question, could return to any of the questions, and could request which data they do not want to be used from any part of their interview or at any point in the research process. I told the participants that they will be informed of the completion of the research process and that they can request a copy of the research if they wish. For the entirety of my data collection I intend to follow the procedures outlined in the consent letter and will not change any of these procedures during the course of my study.

Limitations

Though this study may offer an in-depth analysis into the ways in which educators can implement pedagogies that foster resilience and bridge the achievement
gap for at-risk youth, there continues to be a few limitations that I believe could be addressed in further study. For starters, the sample was limited in size and scope even though my participants provided a significant amount of personal insight. Interviewing more participants, especially students, would have offered a more comprehensive view of the role and implementation that resilience education can have on students’ personal and academic development. Also, the selection criteria used for choosing the participants limited the effective reach and audience of this study. Since this study focused primarily on at-risk youths and the perspective of their teachers (participants), my findings were limited to that education sphere, instead of towards the universal application of resilience in diverse education environment with diverse educators. In order to assess the true value of teachers’ pedagogies with regards to resilience and academic achievement, participants should have been selected from all types of schools and communities.

Another limitation of my study was that Jill and Judy belong to the same school. Although each participant offered differing descriptions and insights with regards to their teaching perspective, pedagogies and experiences; they share the same policies and students, thus narrowing the depth of studying resilience amongst diverse students, schools and communities.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I analyzed the three semi-structured interviews that were conducted with past and present educators of the intermediate grades. The purpose of this analysis is to explore and investigate the various pedagogical practices that these teachers developed and utilized in order to foster resilience and bridge the achievement gap for at-risk students. In an attempt to offer a clear and concise conceptualization of my collected information, I have coded my data into four themes: Teachers’ Perspectives; Students’ Needs; Pedagogical Theory & Programming; and Resilient Pathways. I condense these themes into sub-themes in order to provide a more in-depth interpretation of my participants’ beliefs in regards to my research question and literature review. Though these themes offer succinct insights into many different domains of resilience, it is important to note that these themes are neither fully-inclusive nor mutually exclusive of each other. The discoveries gleaned from these finding should help contribute to the ongoing discourse pertaining to risk, resilience and academic achievement.

4.1 Teachers’ Perceptions

In this section, I explore my participants’ definitions of risk, resilience and academic achievement, along with their awareness and interpretation of the factors that impact student resiliency.

4.1.1 Definitions of Risk, Resilience & Academic Achievement

Participants were asked to provide definitions relating to their perceptions of at-risk students, resilient students, and resilience education. Each of the three participants
reflected apprehension and dislike when defining the term or “label” of at-risk with regards to their students. For example, Jim stated:

I have trouble with the term ‘at-risk student’. I don't necessarily think that it puts the focus in necessarily the appropriate place…I wouldn’t necessarily say that the kid is at-risk so much as maybe the school system is at risk, that the school is at risk and at risk for failing these kids who are just kids who need specific kinds of supports to be successful… so I guess the ‘at-risk’ we're talking about is in relation to schooling in particular.

Here, Jim believed that the term “at-risk student” is misguided, individualizing the idea of risk solely on behalf of a child’s personal ability rather than on factors that stem from the greater educational community. He extended this line of thinking as he discussed school “dropouts”, who should in fact be termed “pushouts” because of the lack of supports that schools ultimately provide to students who need different instructional approaches to success. Jim reasserted the importance of schooling’s effect on resilience as he explained:

I think students are students, and young people are young people, and circumstances and systemic sort of challenges put them into places that either make those challenges really, really great or make those challenges much easier to deal with

Judy mirrored Jim’s sentiment in stating that, “People don’t like the term ‘at-risk’ because it can mean so much.” Here, Judy exemplified the rationale that Jim held with regards to the vagueness of the “at-risk student” label. Judy continued her definition of risk by linking it directly with successful development. She stated:

I would describe a student as "at risk" if something is impeding their journey towards success…I think we have to look at each student and we redefine success based on each student. So, if something is impeding their journey learning academically or their journey developing socially and emotionally, then I would describe that student as at risk because it is always about the growth and it is always about the journey… I'm specifically not saying if something is impeding the achievement of the expectation, I'm deliberately not saying that, because for many students that is obviously a goal, a reasonable goal, something that they're
moving towards and for other students that’s really not the goal. So, I'm not using that as a marker.

Like Jim, Judy believed strongly in an equitable and academic approach to defining risk, one that assesses the needs of each individual student, instead of representing, “…an umbrella term that we use statistically and apply to ‘Oh, if a student is achieving below 70%’.” She chose to stray from an overarching, deficit view of risk because it fails to consider the larger institutional issues that may be affecting the student’s ability to succeed. Therefore, instead of labelling students as at-risk based on one underlying definition that represents a multitude of detrimental factors, Judy believes educators must meet the needs of each individual student by, “…clearly and narrowly defining what we’re talking about when we’re saying that this student is at-risk.” The academic and socio-emotional development of risk is also echoed by Jill who defined at-risk students as being:

At risk of failure, at risk of explosion, at risk of social issues. So, for me, it’s not just an academic indicator. It is a child who is on the edge or who is not mastering sufficiently any skill. That skill might be reason, that skill might be math, that skill might be emotional responses that skill might be social interaction...so, for me, at risk is a little broader than the norm. But in terms of the Board's definition of "at risk" it's primarily linked to behavioural or academic.

Jill agreed with the other two participants, in that risk is not just linked solely to students’ ability to learn and succeed in the classroom, but centred in the successful development of all the psychological, social and academic needs that they require.

On the topic of resilience, each participant provided a different conceptual definition and understanding of its impact on student development and success. With a tremendous amount of experiences from both teaching and developing programs within high priority communities, Jim introduced a broad and comprehensive definition of resilience in which, “…resilience really is being able to deal with adversity and
challenges in a way that doesn't push you back but actually gives you extra strength.” Jim continued to describe resilience as a means to resist the negative influences that exist systemically throughout our societal constructs and institutions. He argued that students must learn and develop the strengths necessary to endure and overpower the barriers of oppression that they might face.

Judy seemed to conceptualize resilience through a more reflective approach in which, “…resilience has a lot to do with learning from mistakes. It's the ability to recover from a perceived failure.” Unlike Jim’s belief in which resilience stems from endurance in the face of adversity, Judy believed that resilience stems from our personal and continuous ability to “learn from our own mistakes” in situations of recognized failure. However, she built on Jim’s point of persistence in specifying that:

There's a connection between resilience and perseverance because it's easy for kids or for adults to say "This is not my cup of tea" and abandon that particular area, problem, task, challenge or whatever. So to me resilience says, "O.k., that didn't work out. How can I do it better? How can I try it this time?" and the whole willingness to keep trying is the sort of practical way of looking at it.

According to both participants, this idea of perseverance can be developed from the fostering of strengths against systemic impediments or from utilizing strategies learned from past mistakes. Judy described her vision of a resilient student who can persevere and find a reason to continue on in challenging areas, while staying open to new learning experiences generated from both positive and negative learning opportunities.

Jill, on the other hand was, “Surprised [Resilience Education] is out there, having never come across it before…. but in terms of resilience it is something that we do as teachers naturally.” Though Jill had never been introduced to resilience theory, she believed that it is something inherent in her teaching practice. Her lack of knowledge on the theoretical
concept nevertheless led her to a similar, perhaps inherent, conclusion put forth by the
other participants in which she stated that resilience can be defined:

… in terms of helping a child to counter negative messages, helping a child to get
past a failure, helping a child to cope with whatever they’re faced with at home in
the classroom setting, so pretty much just from my understanding is helping that
child to cope.

Jill’s definition added teachers as a source of support with regards to resiliency,
someone who could provide students with positive messaging and measures for coping in
order to withstand failure and challenges in various environments. However, Jill did
match Jim and Judy’s definition and instead characterized resilient students as being:

… like a tree blowing in the wind. They have the challenges but they're not
folding under it. They have the challenges but are able to control all the other
facets to make a success of their lives. So, it’s pretty much helping that child or it’s
that child who is able to stand his or her own ground.

This eloquent expression reaffirmed the concept of persistence and perseverance with
regards to resilience. Jill meanwhile confirmed Judy’s belief of developing resilience
from learning from mistakes, “Because resiliency is a personal thing…Anything that
happens to a child becomes the tool for learning about resilience.” As her fellow
participants expressed, resiliency is a tool forged from the many difficult experiences that
we encounter and one that can be sharpened as we successfully withstand these
challenging opportunities.

4.1.2 Promoting & Impeding Factors of Resilience & Academic Achievement

Participants were asked to characterize the various factors that both promote and
impede the fostering of resilience within students and their possible effect on academic
achievement. All three participants emphasized how interactions and mindsets of the
individual, family, community, educational setting, and societal constructs can affect students’ ability towards cultivating resilience. Judy stated:

The mindset is probably the single biggest [promoting] factor… It's the position from which you're coming. The message that we get is whether you think you can or you can't because that's the whole idea of resiliency. We have to get into our students the idea that despite the failure, press on. Because there are going to be things that are deliberately put in your path, there are going to be things that are put in your path that aren't put in somebody else's path. For a whole host of reasons those things, the expectation, or the hope, or the message here is to continue and to find a way around and to do what you can to move on.

As Judy indicated, resiliency stems from the persistence over the barriers that are placed in our way and students’ ability to cultivate the strengths and determination to move on.

These challenging and strengthening factors can come in the form of societal constructs, community and family influences, and academic or social learning elements. As Jim explained:

There are things that the school has very little control over … socio-economic questions for sure have an impact on resiliency, family turmoil has, abuse, violence at home, violence in the community, Nutrition I think all of those things impact [student achievement, resilience, and engagement]…, I think basic needs not being met can play a huge role in kids' ability to self-regulate and to deal with things in a non-reactionary kind of way. And then in schools, when schools are set up to put people in boxes and not support people to live up to and even exceed their potential it impedes resiliency.

Jim demonstrated an extensive viewpoint with regards to resilient impediments or risk factors. Jim spoke to the negative impact that violence, poverty, family turmoil and educational uniformity can have on resilience development. Judy extends this thought of far-reaching impediments in stating that:

There are some institutional structures and barriers that can impede student resiliency. Institutional in terms of education, but also institutional in terms of society. Those impediments can be based on race, they can be based on gender, and they can be based on class.
Here, Judy relayed the typical discriminatory factors that produce the constant inequalities and biases within society, as well as within the school walls. Jill furthered this point in explaining that it is not just the institutional barriers that impede resilience but, “the pressure of everything just converging. That becomes an issue. And it's funny because the pressure is supposed to build resilience.” Therefore, Jill believed that resilience development can be disrupted by the amalgamation of multiple factors, while at the same time; the pressure of facing multiple barriers could also lead to opportunities to foster resilience. Judy concurred with this in asserting that:

These are big things and they're institutional and they're societal and they're impediments. It doesn't mean that it can't be worked around -- and I prefer the term "worked around" as opposed to "overcome" because "overcome" to me implies that it's unhelpful, done and finished. No, it's still there, but there's ways around those blockages or those barriers... The institutional stuff, if I could snap my fingers and change it, I would.

While Judy described the implied barriers that will always present themselves, Jim spoke to the inclusive promoting factors of student resilience. Specifically, Jim focused on the importance of safe and supportive environments where students can connect and feel valued as contributing members to the learning environment. Jim believed that creating nurturing environments that cultivate resilience through community agencies and organizations can help these students “work around” the various systemic barriers. For example, Jim stated:

I had a lot of experience also trying to connect young people who had greater challenges maybe to community agencies, in particular the agencies in the community that worked with youth around helping youth in the community sort of deal with some of the struggles that they are going through in relation to violence and drugs and all the issues that connect the kids who are having challenges in communities like that. ...I guess it happens in communities all over the place, but more so probably in communities where poverty is a bigger issue.
Jim understood that many community advocates, like “Access Alliance” and “Pathways to Education”, are themselves made up of many resilient guides and mentors, who can help promote the skills that these challenged children need and, “understand better the experiences that the kids are going through than probably most middle class teachers do.” Students can relate on a whole “…different level than people who drive into the community and drive out.” These positive remarks were shared by the other participants; however, their perspectives focused more on police involvement with regards to resilience agency. Jill speaks to experiences where:

[The police] run programs in the community center and they have come to talk with our kids, too, in terms of safety for themselves, so they do what they can in terms of building that community strength….so you do have that collaboration, which is something that the kids need to see and appreciate as well.

However, Jill also believed that relationships with the police are not as good as they should be, “especially with a community of this nature where people are very (whether rightly or wrongly so) suspicious of gang activities so the police are not really a trusted body.” Jill’s alternating perspectives addressed the problems with police in high-risk neighbourhoods, while at the same time speaking to their importance when trying to build community strength. Judy took a more neutral approach to the police. She explained that belief in police partnership fluctuates and depends on how proactive they are in developing positive relations, versus the reactive approach to only being present during conflict or negative circumstances. However, she explained, “I think it changes, it's always changing and we have an obligation to create the best environment and the best relationships that we can… [police] are part of the community, there's positive association there, police are people too.”
Unlike Jill and Judy, Jim had a more negative perspective concerning police collaboration within the high-need, priority communities he had taught in. Jim believed:

In my opinion, police were not a community advocate for the kids in that community and lots of times the police were part of the problem in terms of the kids in that community…We spent time working with them, the kids, around how to respond when the police stop you for no reason, which happened all the time.

Jim spoke to some of the misgivings that drive Jill’s perceptions of police involvement, especially when considering that police and youth interaction are sometimes presented in negative situations. This illustrated the point made by all three participants, in which community advocacy; including police need to be considered when shaping resilient students and environments. Jill summed up this point in stating that community agencies can help turn schools into more positive environments, where both supportive and financial resources are provided in order to assist academic success and student engagement.

All participants also spoke to the importance of family and parents when focusing on factors that either promote or impede student resiliency and academic achievement. Judy explained:

While teachers are the single biggest influence on students in terms of learning and that sort of thing and in terms of instruction and academic achievement if you will, it's a partnership and we're all playing a role. So, the teachers work in partnership with parents, and they work in partnership with community members, and we try to build on that.

For Judy, it is the various external or environmental factors that work in collaboration in order to promote student resiliency and achievement. However, sometimes these community and family factors are presented with difficulties that many students and families may encounter based on their past education histories and social contexts. For example, Jim stated:
The kids in the schools where I worked had lots and lots of challenges… many of them were refugees and immigrants from other places with missed schooling along the way because they were in camps or whatever, parents who grew up many generations living in poverty in Toronto who had terrible experiences with school themselves.

Again we see the systemic or societal barriers that play a part in disrupting students’ abilities to develop healthy, along with the educational misgivings that parents can pass on to their children. Judy echoed this idea where:

In some families you have kids who are very, very self-confident and have that growth mindset and that resiliency because it's fostered at home. In other cases, you might have a parent's phobia that's passed onto the child… so we recognize that it can be an advantageous partnership, we reach out to parents, we want to make the partnership

Similarly to Jim, Judy recognized the educational “phobias” that many parents hold against current academic institutions and that students inherit in the process. Jill believed this is especially important for students who live, “with criticism all the time without having anybody to talk to. The parent who is not there…those things can affect [resiliency].” So parents can affect student resiliency and academic achievement through their negative experiences and perceptions of education, which may alter their involvement in helping their children handle challenging situations. Therefore, as Judy indicated, educators need to cultivate parents as educational partners who provide support and high expectations for their children. She believes that regardless of parents’ phobias or family difficulties, “All parents want the best for their kids, regardless of what they themselves are able to provide.” Jim related this thought in terms of his own experience as a father, reflecting on his own privilege in relation to the effects of environmental and familial factors on student resiliency. He explained:

[Students] come from families that deal with issues that my family has never had to deal with in terms of what you're going to put on the table to eat vs. paying the rent
4.2 Students’ Needs

In this section I investigate how the participants consider the personal, social, and academic needs of their students with regards to resilience development and academic success.

4.2.1 Personal Developmental Needs

All participants believed in the importance of developing their students’ personal strengths in order to establish strong foundations for student resiliency. Whether due to at-risk labels or societal barriers, Jill described her school’s community as stigmatized, where, “Many of these kids struggle with an issue of identity based on how the wider society views them.” As Jill stated, students’ identities are often disrupted or characterized by the deficit lenses, attitudes, and labels put on them by the dominant culture. Jill believed that in order to persevere against societies criticisms, develop a firm identity, and in turn foster resilience; students need to:

Understand that it is not an individual's definition of a community that really matters and it's not where you live that defines you...It’s Helping the students understand, showing them the different scenarios that could happen, identifying the strategies that they can use to counter or treat issues that they come across, being able to build arguments, being able to argue issues that they think important to them. Being able to self-advocate.

Judy furthered this point towards a need to identity and self-advocacy in explaining that:

The kids now are at the age where we can encourage that kind of self-advocacy and that kind of questioning: "Can we talk about this?" or "I have a story that's related to that" or "In my culture, this is how this topic is discussed or analyzed" and having that kind of conversation.

As the participants have stated, it is imperative the students develop a sense of identity, self-advocacy and ultimately a voice. As Jim described, “Students are vocal, they are
opinionated and we're going to celebrate that and we're going to build on that. We're going to recognize that as a strength.” As educators, each participant believed that they needed to start building students ability to express themselves and who they are, in order to envision themselves as a source of multiple strengths. Jim believed that, “…everybody has to be seen as a learner and has stuff to offer and interesting things and when that's really happening I think resiliency is just a natural consequence of that.” Therefore, resiliency is a by-product of students’ ability to formulate strong ideals of identity, advocacy, voice, and value.

However, the participants point out that teachers need to model and promote situations for students to develop these personal strengths. For examples, Judy made the point that we’re, “…moving from that whole teacher/preacher model, where you're actually looking for their comment, looking for them to reflect and be thoughtful, looking for them to be a part of the learning.” Therefore, students also need to become advocates of their own engagement and have a say in directing their own learning. Jim believed that this idea allows students to, “all of a sudden find ways to see themselves as essential to what's going on as opposed to being always on the sideline of what's going on.” In order to do this, Jill believed strongly in restorative justice practices where children can express their voice and opinion on things, standing up for what they believe in, while building confidence and respect.

Judy proposed a more involved interaction with students, where teachers need to consider:

Student voice in terms of content of the lesson, in terms of how we are evaluating, the choices that we make in terms of what the resources are going to be around that particular lesson. So it's that student voice piece, I think, that comes in day-to-day lesson planning, that would be the outlet for that expression.
The above mentioned strengths and developmental strategies can help cultivate student resiliency, along with academic achievement and engagement. However, in order to implement these strategies and foster these strengths, as well as learning, Jim expressed that it is not just about finding what it is that they like to do or what they’re good at doing “…but valuing that for real, not just pretending to value it but really valuing it because kids are very smart about whether you're telling the truth or not.”

4.2.2 Social Learning & Needs

Each participant described the importance of social development with regards to sustaining student resiliency, healthy development, and academic achievement. For example, Jill believed that, “At this developmental stage they tend to be very self-absorbed…so self-absorbed that it's very difficult for them to even hear what the other person is saying.” It is for these reasons that Jim suggested the need of implementing programs within schools that help students’ better address socio-emotional issues in order to enhance their ability to deal with challenging emotional or social experiences. This especially rang true to Judy and her experiences with at-risk students who face challenges in:

Those social areas because they're, perhaps, not as popular as they'd like to be or they find themselves in conflict more often than some other people….ability to not withdraw, not to say, "O.k., the solution to this is I'll just stay by myself." No, let's take a look at how you can make friends. Let's take a look at how you can interact with people in such a way that they're going to want to continue to interact with you and that the interactions, more often than not, are positive.

Here, Judy indicated the significance of positive interactions and relationships, so that students gain a deeper sense of control over what goes on around them with regards to understanding social cues and skills in their day-to-day lives.
Jim shared a similar approach, especially for negative interaction, where socio-emotional learning skills can help resolve conflict, while allowing those students to keep a sense of respect. He stated:

... in the everyday life of a schoolyard which is really more like the real world than a classroom, they learned how to begin to think about things differently and if this happens how can I respond that's maybe better in my interest in the long run than what I might initially think I'm going to do? In the end, what will that mean for me and how can we better handle this so that we both walk away from this with some respect?

He advanced this idea when speaking specifically about student interactions with police, where many students in his teaching communities were being stopped by police without cause. He believed conflict resolution was imperative in order to allow students to stay out of trouble, while at the same time keep their dignity and sense of self-respect.

With regards to building academic achievement and resilience on the whole, Jill considered trust and personal relationships to be a significant indicator towards students’ academic success. However, Jill also noted that even the strongest relationships amongst friends can interfere with a student’s ability to persist against challenges in academics. She argued that these struggling students, “…don't want their friends to know that they are ‘dumb’. That's how they see themselves and they don't want to sell that image of themselves so they'd rather just be close-mouthed about it rather than getting the help they need.” However, Jim provided a more positive angle with regards to these trusting, authentic relationships where “…that ‘at riskness’ happens less when people are connected in a people-to-people kind of way and I think most schools don't have that kind of people-to-people focus... Relationship-wise. People really getting to know people and teachers being people with kids.” As Jim stated, labels of risk can be dismantled through
the promotion of relationships or people-to-people connectedness, which in turn act as protective factors for resilience.

However, Judy stressed the relevance of having conversations concerning the fact that individuals aren’t the same, we are all diverse in terms of our needs and identities, but we can still share the common desire to be accepted regardless of our differences. Judy believed that this is best developed through restorative justice circles, where, “We’re taking [knowledge] from the one person who's super talented, or good, or whatever and we're sharing that knowledge amongst the rest of us. We’re also making it known that we all have different levels and identities.” Jill reinforces this idea of restorative justice with regards to teaching resiliency, diversity and inclusion of differences because:

Especially for this age they don't want to be separated from their friends and they don't want to have their friends see them as any different from how they are so you find that children are not honest about what they really understand or don't... It’s just about being vulnerable. That piece is so critical... Talking, dialoguing, running activities that actually exercise the skills that are necessary for resilience and from the top down.

Therefore, students need to develop strategies of resilience through interaction and from sharing relatable and vulnerable experiences with their peers.

Instead of the idea of relating to others based on differences in identity, Jim believed in relating to others based on understanding the differences we hold in ability. He stressed that it is critical to “not isolate kids based on their strengths or their lack of strengths... We need to mix kids up and help people see that different people have different strengths and different needs.” Judy believes that teacher’s must model their own resilience and their appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses. She emphasized:
So if we all sort of look at things in that way and we try to be resilient in our own right as individuals and we are open and share that with students, that's how you model. You model in terms of what you say and what you do, you also model in terms of what you share…When you share that philosophy with your kids and certainly when you share stories with your students to that effect, I think a lot of students, more than we recognize, are impacted by those sorts of personal examples, especially if they're not common. And it speaks to the idea of resilience, especially when they have our personal success stories.

Jim approved of the modelling approach where he believed, “You have to be able to connect to kids and communicate with them and talk to them like they're people and share with them like you're a person and then the other stuff is possible to learn.”

4.2.3 Academic Learning & Needs

All three participants mentioned that teachers’ expectations and relationships with their students are crucial towards ensuring their students’ learning success. Jim states:

The most important thing is the relationship between the teacher in the classroom and their students and how the teacher creates that relationship and sustains that relationship in my mind makes or breaks what goes on in the classroom… Kids can't learn when there isn't that relationship… In my mind it's really: that's good teaching… these relationships between teachers and students are just good teaching, you can't teach well without those people-to-people skills.

Judy suggested a more interpersonal approach to learning and a focus on messaging when forming relationships and expectations. For example:

So, I think that it has a lot to do with our language and our messaging and our responsibility as educators is to give the best possible messaging to students -- messaging that is going to open up the world for them as opposed to close it down… I think that openness to learning stands and the openness to growth that's part of what you're modeling, we're learning together.

Jill took a more direct explanation towards developing these relationships, in which she believes in continuously, “affirming the kids, making sure that their voice is heard, giving them a chance to display their successes, just being there for them and also challenging them, too.” It is this affirmation of student ability that drives them to become successful.

Jim acknowledged how these high and realistic expectations coupled with validation of
student potential can help at-risk students transform their self-perception towards seeing themselves as learning and as someone who can contribute. Jim stated:

Kids who have big challenges in school are kids who have never had, in my opinion, positive experiences from the adults that work in those buildings in terms of seeing them as potential learners; you know expecting them to be successful instead of expecting them to not succeed. And I think the whole question around expectations for kids, poor and racialized kids, and what teachers expect them to do or not do plays a huge part in what kids actually produce.

According to Jim, if educators want students to become intrinsically motivated towards their own learning, then they must encourage and celebrate students’ strengths and success through supportive relationships.

With regards to actual instruction, each participant detailed the importance of utilizing teaching practices that attempt to incorporate the diverse identities, as well as socio-emotional needs of each and every one of their students within the classroom. Jim feels that in order for students to visualize success or become successful in the classroom then instruction needs to reflect who they are. Jim states:

If I have to come to school every day and everything that happens in the classroom is about somebody else and about somebody else's lives and about somebody else's community and about somebody else's parents and nobody looks like me or my family or does jobs like my family or any of those things, if I have to leave who I am at the door and come into this foreign situation, I'm never going be able to connect.

However, Jill argued for the importance of motivation with regards to learning because “You can't mandate interest in exploring. You can't force a child to think beyond what he or she is feeling or understanding.” Following Jill’s belief, Judy contended that in order to tap into students’ feelings and understanding, educators must provide students with resources within the school that are both relevant to and reflective of students interests.

With regards to determining what resources and strategies to use, Judy added that, “…Kids will tell you, they're happy to tell you what they're good at, and they're happy to
tell you what they know, and they're happy to tell you what they can do and show you. So we use that as a tool and integrate that into student learning.” Jim emphasized this point as he proposed content connection and engagement as the most important factor leading to the success of at-risk or marginalized student. He asserted:

I don't mean like that you just pay lip service to it but that the experiences of the kids and their community and their families’ needs to be central to what gets spoken about and talked about and investigated and queried, all those kinds of things, in order to engage kids in the same way that middle class kids get engaged because they do get to connect in lots of ways to the things that are happening in the classroom. And we're expecting kids who come with more challenges because of their socio-economic position to have to work much harder in order to connect to something that isn't really relevant to who they are.

4.3 Pedagogical Theory & Programming

This section will provide insight into the personal pedagogies of my participants, with regards to instilling resilient supports into their instructional practices, while promoting student engagement and success. This section will also deconstruct and assess my participants’ understandings and application of pedagogical practices that attempt to build upon students’ cognitive, cultural and individual strengths and identities.

4.3.1 Personal Pedagogies

My participants described the ways in which they incorporate and model resilient strategies into their pedagogical practices. Jim stated:

I think that the best way that schools can [model resilience], is making sure that the culture of the school and the classroom is one of acceptance and inclusion and asset-focused and that everything that happens in that school is about the kids and their families and the community. It’s not about trying to change who they are and to not accept who they are but about accepting who everybody is and figuring out what everybody needs to do to become better at whatever it is they do and I think all of those things help "at risk” [students].

Jim’s pedagogical approach to modelling resilience is primarily focused towards ensuring that challenged student have an inclusive environment that generates strengths and
concepts of community. Jill took a more direct approach to students in which her educational practices are premised from the fact that it is her responsibility to prepare individuals, especially those at-risk, for their existence in society. She incorporated, “ways for them to discover that they're really not bad and they're not the bottom of the barrel,” while prescribing “…a little bit of balance in terms of helping them to develop that little bit of independence as well as helping them to understand what the parameters are.” Judy echoed the importance of these parameters in explaining that success isn’t “that cut and dried.” Her pedagogical approach to academic achievement is centred in teaching students the benefits of “trying” to be successful. Judy remarked:

We can give the message that "hey, you're smart and these are all the worldly benefits that are going to come to you as a result of being smart.” Or, we can deliver the message, "you're a really hard worker and that's going to provide these advantages and you're going to contribute to the world because you're such a hard worker...My expectation is the way that they got in is from hard work and a desire and resiliency and recognizing that “if I have a weakness here, this is how I can work around it.”

Judy’s positions her teaching practices within building the ideals of hard-work in relation to becoming successful and where she believes it is better to focus on implementing one or two things really well opposed to many things very minimally and ineffectively. Like Judy, in order for students to understand the meaning of success, Jim professed that resilience education is or at least should be inherent in all teaching practices. He concluded, “It's not like you would have a classroom where you weren't basing what went on on strategies that would help kids build resilience. That's part of good teaching in my mind because that's part of helping them learn how to be successful for themselves.”
4.3.2 Practical Intelligence

Each participant had trouble understanding the meaning or method of utilizing practical intelligence development or tacit knowledge within classroom instruction. After providing each participant with a brief definition (Practical intelligence is the cognitive ability that individuals use to find the best fit between themselves and the demands of the environment) and example which described the concept of “street smarts”, the participants provided experiences that reflected their perspectives on the concept. Judy recognized how educational discourse about valuing different ways of thinking has transformed over the years. She explained:

I think that we were very limited in saying what skills we valued…So we're now looking at multiple intelligences. We’re now saying there's really a lot of ways to be "smart", a lot of ways to be -- and we value them more than we did in the past. … Some of those alternative ways of being smart, we value those more now. That's one aspect of bringing that new mindset and looking at that into classrooms.

Here, Judy described the importance of considering these new ways to be “smart”, focusing on a positive transformative mindset towards assessing competence. She specifically mentioned multiple intelligences, a theory that promotes the influence of practical intelligence on learning.

Jim provided a different perspective in which the schoolyard or spaces external to the school walls cultivate this idea of “playground intelligence”, which in his experience was more often related to violence in the social context. Through this concept, Jim utilized practical intelligence in his teaching to combat issues of violence within his schools, where students took on leadership roles as peacemakers and mediators to resolve issues of conflict. He stated that using practical intelligence in situations like this “Helps make the classroom a place that they feel familiar with, but also allows them to begin to
sort of challenge some of the stuff around youth culture that they might not have even thought about.” Jill agreed with strategies that bring out the street smarts in students and engages students to work together towards solving problems. However, she disagreed with the term “street smarts”, “Because it is an intelligence that children have nurtured by virtue of their family settings…something they have developed. Street Smarts should be "personal thinking skills."

Jim reflected this idea of personal thinking skills, where he believed that students learn and become more engaged when instructional content or discourse push students to solve problems “…that young people deal with, for example in the schoolyard or in the community…when they are problems that [students] actually think are problems for real.” Here, Jim presented that when instruction attempts to develop personal thinking skills or deeper meaning around relevant problem solving, students become engaged and motivated to accomplish the set tasks because the knowledge attained will be useful in their daily lives. Each participant reflected this idea of practical intelligence, specifically when speaking to its impact in conflict resolution activities or even in utilizing the gambling game of “Dice” to teach probability. Jill concluded with the idea that street smarts or practical intelligence promotes the whole idea behind resilience or strength-based education, “Starting from where the students are at and from what they're able to do and building on that.” For these three educators, practical intelligence development helps students foster their personal competencies as a strength and a valued form of intelligence, where their external context and past mistakes helps prepare them for future challenges.
4.3.3 Asset-Based Development

In discussion about asset-based pedagogies, each participant emphasized the significance of having expectations that value students’ strengths rather than a deficit approach or mindset. Jim highlighted the significant impact that asset-based approaches and positive perspectives bring towards supporting students academically. He maintained the teachers’ low expectations stem from the deficit perspectives they hold towards their students’ abilities. Instead, Jim argued that schools need to start building upon students’ strengths, “looking at [student] assets and therefore pushing their expectations higher.” Jim asserted that it is not a question of seeing where students have challenges, but instead how we as teacher use our students’ strengths to build on these challenges. This is very important with regards to student identity and learning within the classroom because “Nobody sits in a classroom when all they’re ever told is what they can’t do.”

Judy echoed similar thoughts towards building on students’ strengths in which she asserted the importance of trying not to have a deficit model. Instead trying to work from a strength-based approach where teachers recognize productive classroom talk and believe that it is a tool or strategy, “…something that comes naturally to kids that we’re going to build on.” Judy added that it is not just about our expectations of students that signify asset-based development, but also the expectations and assets of the surrounding community, where she believed students, families and communities should have choice and access to the resources that are provided to more privileged communities. She believed it is important, “To let our kids know this is available to you too…. I think that our goal in terms of community involvement is twofold: it's to know what's available to support students and families, to know that, to make it plain to our parents and our students and then to branch out from there.”
Jill reflected this direct approach towards accessing community resources, whereby she has her students study the history and geography of the community, identifying what should be considered positive resources or assets and where are they located in the community. She implemented this through community-based research assignments, community walks, creative writing about neighbourhood stories, and most importantly through parent engagement. She initiated a career day, where parents, community professional and leaders came in from the community to demonstrate diverse sets of possible careers to spark interest and demonstrate success. Judy reiterated the need for oral advocacy learning and communication in her teaching practices because talk and conversation in the classroom, “...is a strength. It's very much a strength of this age group and I would say it's a strength of this community.

Jim concluded how asset-based development leads to resilience. He stated:

Teachers or people who work in schools and communities like where I worked, need to start from the focus that sees the strengths of the kids in their community and their families as opposed to the deficits...So, seeing the assets that the kids have and tons of strengths that most people don't see as strengths... like, you know, the fact that so many kids speak so many languages -- instead of seeing that as a problem seeing what an incredible strength that is.

**4.3.4 Culturally Relevant & Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP)**

Continuing with the emphasis on students assets, each of my participants believe that students’ culture and background played a pivotal role in building on students’ individual strengths in order to promote engagement, resilience and academic achievement. Jim is a strong proponent for cultural relevant and responsive pedagogy or CRRP, which he describes as:

Sort of a whole big way of looking at schools and classrooms and, you know, connections to classroom climate, school culture, leadership, student voice, all those things in a school... when the center of what goes on in a classroom, for
example, relates to issues that connect to kids’ lives and who they are, the engagement is good.

Jim contended that students experiences related to their lived lives, families and communities, needs to be reflected through instructional content and resources in order to produce the same type of engagement and achievement that is evidenced for students who are represented by the dominant culture (i.e. middle class students).

Judy echoed this sentiment, arguing that “My expectation is that every day, all the time, their home life is being integrated into their educational experience.” However, Judy contended that CRRP should not “become just sort of flat and predictable and ‘this is what you have, and this is what you know, this reflects your culture, so this is what you're going to do’.” Instead, she insists it should be incorporated as a means to offer students choices for learning about new experiences and diverse cultures. Jill reflected this way of thinking as she endorsed CRRP as a way towards, “helping [students] to see that even though you're born in Canada there are no walls. We're a global village.”

Jill promoted this idea that CRRP can help foster the social needs that students require to become resilient, through the sharing, respecting and appreciation of the diverse cultures that make up their classrooms. For example, she claimed that the multiculturalism inherent to CRRP helps focus on:

…equity, making sure students understand that no group is better than the other one, that they are very respectful of the differences, that they understand what these different festivals and activities mean so that you don't disrespect a group because of what they eat or what they wear.

Here, Jill evidenced the benefit of developing equity, respect and inclusiveness through CRRP, but that we also gain meaning and a sense of community, while we learn from each other’s differences. Jill concluded that, “It is inevitable with a diverse community to have any kind of program without incorporating [Culturally Relevant Pedagogy].”
The majority of my participants also commented on the diverse discussions, issues and contexts that CRRP can envelop. Judy believed that combined with restorative practices, CRRP allows teachers to reflect with their students on how they are being represented through the curriculum, content or instructional practices and that this helps develop partnership towards working and learning together. Jim utilized CRRP school-wide, in order to generate discussion and awareness concerning detrimental issues that affect the students who come to school in or from high priority neighbourhoods. For example, Jim stated:

I guess in my mind [awareness on violence against women] is culturally responsive and relevant because the issues of violence are really relevant to kids in communities where violence is a big issue and whether it be on the street or in the home or in the schoolyard, violence is huge and safety and feeling not safe is a huge issue for a lot of young people. And so dealing with all of those issues in curricular kinds of ways in my mind is another way of connecting kids very much to issues that are important to them that then engage them that then in my mind do lead to resiliency.

As Jim expressed, Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy does not just have to focus on the cultural and personal background of students, but could also help students to cooperatively uncover and become proponents against the various detrimental issues that their individual communities face. This could not only help students create a sense of community based on common perspectives, but can also foster common strengths to persist and become resilient against these negative experiences in their lives.

4.3.5 Strategies

Each participant was asked to provide examples of strategies that they implemented that reflected the three pedagogies mentioned above. These examples were meant to evidence their understanding of the above pedagogies, as well as their relevance towards resilience building and academic achievement. Each participant emphasized the
importance of incorporating strategies school-wide, in order to create engaging environments that focused on community, ownership and positive expectations. In implementing school-wide approaches to student advocacy, Judy explained, “I really do focus on the language and the philosophy of the school… that whole discussion of "why" -- why are you getting an education?” She believed this helped the students connect to the educators towards developing a productive school community based on mutual agreements concerning the expectation that students had for their teachers and vice-versa.

Jim agreed with this mentality and believed that school-wide programs allow all members of the school to focus on important life issues together, supporting each other towards solving these challenges as a community. Jim exemplified this belief through numerous school-wide projects that focused on social and global issues that related and were relevant to many of the students within his schools. As mentioned above, Jim created year long, school-wide initiatives that focused on violence against women, a peacemaker and mediator program that attempted to alleviate conflicts amongst students, and a large advocacy initiative, in which the whole school developed projects over the course of a few years around South African Apartheid and the accomplishments of Nelson Mandela.

The school then presented these projects, through a culturally reflective lens (i.e. learning the South African National Anthem), to a large number of Toronto residents, including Nelson Mandela himself, who was visiting Toronto after his release from Prison. Jim stated that such strategies not only reflect the harsh experiences and cultures of many of the schools’ students, but also generates a sense of self-efficacy within the students along with engaged and valued accomplishments that they will never forget. He also believed that it isn’t enough to integrate these strategies as a one year, school-wide
project in order to foster engagement, but as a school wide tradition every year. He asserted:

The other thing that's important is to create traditions in schools that kids expect and know are coming and get involved with... create traditions that connect more to kids and their community and their lives and make those be the traditions that happen every year... and if you ask students, these hands on and active traditions might be the thing that they remember most about elementary school.

Therefore, for Jim, it is not just resilient factors on their own that help students achieve, it is student engagement towards the fulfilling and meaningful tasks that they can both look forward to and accomplishment.

Jill acknowledged the value of school-wide strategies, as well as policies with regards to building conflict resolution strategies, pathways for success, and resilience. As both Jill and Judy work in the same school, they both spoke to the importance of restorative justice. Jill stated it involves, “just having children express their voice and their opinion on things, which is another way of building resilience.” Jill also indicated that character education and a non-participation list were two policies enacted within the school to help curb student conflict and disengagement, while building a sense of community and sharing of experiences. Judy added:

This particular journey in terms of restorative practice will build resiliency because you're talking about the language, you're talking about the reflection piece, you're talking about learning from things that haven't been going right. You're talking about being open and not being quite so judgmental. It's a whole shift in mindset... The practical intelligence in terms of social norms and things like that, again we are asking for that that's part of the reason why we want to bring in restorative practice because we want to take a student's innate ability or their natural ability or their practical ability in terms of avoiding conflict or managing conflict and share it.

However, both Jim and Judy cautioned educators who plan on practicing such strategies that stray from the dominant norms of instruction or use political and “real life” concepts to help engage students. Judy stated that using strategies that incorporate the
illegal lives of some at-risk youth, like utilize the gambling game of *dice* to engage

students in studying probability, that there are:

Huge risks associated with it. I think that there needs to be a responsibility…, if
you're going to have this discussion, if you're going to introduce this concept then
I expect it to be done in a way that is responsible…It depends on who's doing it,
[the risky strategies], depends on how it's being done, it depends on the
audience…with great care should that be done and with great responsibility.

Though Jim agreed with the riskiness that some of these strategies exhibit, such as his

Apartheid advocacy program, he insisted:

Some people might see getting involved in such things as risky, as maybe too
political, or whatever and I would just argue that all of those kinds of things are really
the things that engage kids in ways that other things just don't. They hit you in your
heart as well as your head and we all learn differently when we're talking from our
heart and our head as opposed to just our head.

4.4 Resilient Pathways

This section will analyze participants’ respective goals for resilience education,
the foreseeable benefits and challenges towards achieving these goals, and the lifelong
implications of resilience education.

4.4.1 Goals for Resilience Education

Each participant was asked to describe their goals for resilience education. All
three participants emphasized that the goal of resilience education is to ensure that
students develop the skills necessary to persevere against all types of barriers, as well as
the skills to uncover those barriers and the process through which they can learn this
skills in the education setting. Jim characterized his goal as a means to provide the
needed skills to fend off the various challenges in his students’ lives. He stated:

Figuring how to overcome serious challenges and keep going, which in my mind
is really what resilience is, that that can really make a difference in terms of
whether or not that individual is able to be successful or whether they are held
back so severely by the systemic stuff that's around them that they fall into that
place that they would be better off getting out of…
Jim’s goal for resilience education reflected his original definition of resilience, which was described in the first section. Both Jim’s goal and definition positions resilience education towards helping students attain the attributes and skills needed to persevere in the face of systemic oppositions. Jill regarded the goal of resilience education as a means for students to develop the skills to uncover those barriers and to share their discoveries with others. She explained that the goal of resilience education is:

Pretty much to help a child identify those stimulants, those provocative stimulants I should say, and develop strategies in coping with them... also, not only helping them to identify those stimulants for themselves but identify the stimulants for others so that in helping themselves they can also help other people… out of talking about and identifying those triggers and stimulants, they will be able to be more open…

Judy’s goals focused more on the method through which the above mentioned skills could be developed in the classroom. Judy believed that:

The goals have to do with the messages that we give as educators -- the value that we're putting on things. So, are we teaching children that it's more important to be gifted and good at something, or are we teaching children that it's more important to work hard at something?...We need to have messaging that keeps things open, that really encourages growth, that encourages sharing of feelings and the ability, again, to recover from a mistake.

Judy argued that it is more important to provide messages that have students understand the value in working hard and from learning from ones mistakes, so that they can develop self-confidence, self-efficacy and the persistent attitude towards pushing past challenging situations. Similarly, Jill considers resilient factors all the time in her instruction and asserted that these can best be appropriated by students when, “figuring out together collectively with the other people in your school what are the things that we can do that would most help and most support the kids in this building and, in particular, the kids who have the greatest challenges.”
4.4.2 Benefits & Barriers of Implementing Resilience Education

Each participant was asked to portray some of the benefits and challenges that occurred from the implementation of resilience into educational practice. All three participants spoke the maturing and engaging properties of resilience, whereby students learn how to become lifelong, confident problem solvers in and outside of the school context. Jill proposed that resilience benefits students by offering, “The element of maturity, the element of coping, the element of understanding, decision-making, pretty much an appreciation of all the facets that come together to make a particular situation what it is.” Judy also reflected upon how resilience offers the skills that are relevant and important in the everyday development of students. She states:

I think the benefits, again, is that it's very global and very applicable to all areas of life and all facets of life. And that's how you create, the life-long learners, people with enough flexibility in their thinking that they can move from career to career and this is the whole new generation that we're teaching.

Jim also believed that resilience education is very applicable, comprehensive and relevant to both students’ lives and academic learning due to the personal skills that they develop. He explained:

Once they feel that what they're doing and what they can do is important they'll be much more open to looking at things that they have trouble with and figuring out ways to do it because they're starting from a position where they have some kind of self-esteem around learning.

However, he also put forth the possibility of the education system acting as a barrier to students’ resilience and success. He argued that, “When schools are set up to put people in boxes and not support people to live up to and even exceed their potential it impedes resiliency.” Judy mirrored this idea, projecting the transformative approaches that education is now taking. She stated that, “We're not teaching into the manufacturing
world, we're now teaching into this, you know, broad thinking, out-of-the-box thinking, more creatively-based society so we're giving kids the skills.”

Jill based the majority of resilience education impediments in the hands of the teachers and students:

(1) the buy-in of the teacher, (2) the material the resources that that teacher would use to facilitate this process, and (3) the buy-in of the kids themselves, the children themselves…The long and the short of it, the only thing, in my estimation anyway, that affects resiliency is people doing nothing.

She further identified that the most significant disadvantage lies in, “developing the strategies that would help a child or children to understand the process of resilience. Because it's not a one-off thing -- it's a process.” Therefore, Jill worried about the teacher’s ability to create new and engaging strategies that can continuously promote resiliency. Jim also spoke to the systematic, funding, and hiring hurdles that affect the education system and many of the students’ lives in and outside of the classroom. However, the majority of the participants described an optimistic vision with regards to dealing with the impact that these uncontrollable factors have on schools and students.

Judy would rather “not focus on that which can or may impede. I think that it's better to focus your energies elsewhere on what you have control over…if I'm saying that what you do internally is going to help you manage what's out there, there's no point in me listing off 50 things that can stop you or impede you.” This action towards tackling the controllable challenges in one’s life is mirrored by Jim who states:

And so I think there's factors outside of school that the school has very little control over but what we do have control over is what happens in school more or less we have control over them and that's where I think educators have to put their energy. We could blame all kinds of stuff about what's happening outside of school to kids and their families and all that stuff but in the end if we just point the finger there, nothing's going to change. We have control over what we do every day and we do a lot every day.
4.4.3 Lifelong Implications

Each participant spoke to the significance of peoples’ mindset towards resilience education, as well as the processes that ensure resiliency is immersed into the everyday life of students. Jill made an excellent point with regards to the sensitive issues that resilience can elicit and the need for balance in instruction. She explained:

> When you talk about resilience you have to deal with the negative, too, right? And sometimes with some of them they hear negative so much that that could become a discouragement for them. So you need to be able to balance.

Jim added to this balance mindset in conceptualizing the intersectionality or interconnectedness between ability, identity and resilience. He contended that:

> Everyone in your class is an individual but everybody in your class is also part of different kinds of groups in terms of race, in terms of class, in terms of gender, all of those things make up who each of them is so that you have to relate to them as individuals but you also have to acknowledge that certain groups might have particular challenges or particular strengths or particular needs that you're going to focus on group wise.

Again, for these educators it is about finding that balance, or as Judy reiterated, “the balancing of the huge world of people and experiences and goals -- balancing this huge world, this huge number, that to me is the biggest hurdle and it's beneficial -- the fact that we have people at different stages is always beneficial.” Judy transforms the challenges of forming an appropriate balance into an optimistic opportunity, where educators can encourage cooperative problem solving, using students’ difference in identity, ability and experience. This optimistic balancing act produces circumstances for individual, social, and cultural resiliency skills to be observed and shared.

In order for resiliency pedagogies to help students’ develop healthily and successfully, Judy argued that pedagogies must be, “deep as opposed to shallow. It's more the walking the walk than talking the talk... it goes beyond using correct language
to the choices that you make every day as an educator and teaching the children to make the right choices.” Jim believed strongly in helping students develop the skills that guide them towards becoming their own resiliency advocates. Jim emphasized that by helping students make connections to the various systemic inequalities in the world, learning becomes focused on “issues that kids could then think about and question in order to become important citizens in a democratic society.”

In order for resilience to “stick”, Jill emphasized that educators need to stay up to date on these new practices and constantly reflect on our own methods. She stated:

It's just being able to be aware of [resilient practices]. So to heighten awareness or lack of awareness that would impede that pedagogy, but it is something that we do so naturally as teachers sometimes that we don't stop to kind of assess it… that's another fault of us as teachers we tend to get stuck in a rut. It works, so we keep doing it. But how to explore the avenues to expand on what we have going for us.

Jim concurred with this statement, specifically when addressing educators’ failure to address issues relating to risk and deficit perspectives. He argued that many teachers’ philosophies are shaped by their own educational experience, but that the reproduction of those experiences may not be useful to that diverse students existing in our classrooms. He stated that “A lot of the time, it's not like people are intentionally putting people into these boxes but I think people are not forced enough to question what they're doing and what's happening.” Judy insisted that resilience and achievement can improve, “As long as there's flexibility to move around, where we're not cranking out the same sort of kids, the same sort of world, and the same sort of life.”

Jill understood that there is always an outlet to teaching students about resilience, seeing “nothing that actually could affect negatively the issue of resilience because everything becomes a teaching avenue for resilience.” Judy maintained that teachers need
to be flexible and creative, using every introduced challenge as a teaching moment in order to “urge the students who haven't started yet to see if they can get going and to keep the ones that are running, running.”

Each participant agreed that in order to establish lifelong resilience, instruction needs to be treated as a process. As Judy accentuated:

There are so many different areas that you have to focus on, that you have to emphasize, that you have to be responsible about, and done accordingly ... you have to look at the pace you're doing it, you got to go baby steps one thing at a time...[Resilience Pedagogies] can be effective. It all depends on how it's done.

However, Jim believed that the process must be incorporated in congruence with a strength-based lens, where resiliency and academic achievement “all come together” and “what you’re looking at is what kids can do as opposed to what they can’t.”
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

I conducted this study in order to investigate the ways in which intermediate school teachers implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth. It was my aspiration that the findings of this study would help inform not only my own teaching practice and philosophy, but that of present and future educators. More specifically, I intended this research study to offer some insight into why students continue to be “at-risk” of failing and in what ways we can help them improve and persevere against the challenges in both the educational and real-world domain. Although each participant was able to describe various strength-based approaches towards establishing resilience fostering communities, their answers uncovered a complex world where student resiliency is determined through a complex interaction between risk and protective factors, differing mindsets, and instructional processes.

My analysis of the data gathered from my three participants revealed four themes. The first theme of my findings uncovered the significance and relevance in analyzing teachers’ perceptions, specifically addressing their definitions of risk and resilience and the characteristics of protective and impeding factors. The second theme assessed students’ personal, social, and academic needs and how considering these needs leads to resilience and academic achievement. The third theme discussed and appraised teachers’ pedagogical practices in relation to practical intelligence, asset-based development, and culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy. The fourth and final theme focused on the important pathways leading to resilience, where understanding the goals, benefits and barriers, and possible lifelong implications of resilience can cultivate more inclusive and
equitable practices. These findings, in collaboration with the themes that emerged during my initial literature review, should help inform future pedagogical practices and a deeper understanding towards fostering the equitable achievement and resilience for all students.

**Relation to Literature Review**

There is a significant relationship between the findings and the various themes described within the literature review. First, much of the literature described multiple interpretations of resilience, where there is no universal definition because it is too multidimensional and context specific. All three participants provided similar perceptions with regards to resilience, but each definition differed on approach and conceptualization, evidencing that there is no single, concrete definition for the concept. Though participants’ interpretations can be unified to form an all-encompassing, comprehensive approach to resilience education; my findings, in collaborations with the literature, promotes the need of a detailed and specific definition, goal and framework in order for resilience pedagogical practices to be effective.

Identifying risk and protective factors was a common theme that emerged from the literature review and my participants’ data. Both sources focused on students’ environments, families, schools, communities, and individual selves with regards to pinpointing the protective measures that need to be developed in order to foster resilience and positive development. More specifically, my research evidenced the importance in which these protective factors promote caring relationships, high expectations of students, and opportunities to participate or see themselves as contributing members of school and society. However, as this study intended to investigate the resilient pedagogies and factors that affect at-risk students, both my participant’s perspectives and the
literature point to the power of the teacher with regards to successful development and academic achievement. Teachers and the educational community are very influential towards determining whether a student will develop the various types of protective factors or falter and fall victim to the at-risk status quo, which perpetuates failure.

A common connection displayed throughout the findings and literature review is the development of healthy, strong relationships. Whether it is between students and their peers or between students and their teachers, relationships help students develop the social competences needed in order to develop control over their environments, connect with others and become resilient. The importance of restorative justice with regards to opening up opportunities for deep, emotional connections between students was a theme that emerged constantly in the discussion I had with my participants. This idea of personal connections and sharing of experiences was emphasized throughout the literature review. The data and literature also supported the importance of teachers acting as models for resilience and their ability to reveal to students the challenges within their own personal lives in order to elicit dialogue, where individual vulnerability is the first step towards forming trusting and safe relationships with each other.

The literature indicated the need for a shift in mindsets, from deficit perspectives and discourses concerning risk and resilience, towards an equitable and strength-based approach that focused on the positive attributes of students rather than the negative factors that they are associated with. Each participant expressed the importance of these positive mindsets with regards to all stakeholders involved in the fostering of students developmental processes. Not only was it suggested to develop these strength-based mindsets within the educational community, but that we shift the ways in which we define and think about success, intelligence and identities within the classroom.
Participants spoke to the importance of developing “out-of-the-box” approaches to fostering resilience and academic achievement, especially since the more conventional approaches have failed these at-risk youths to date. Therefore, both the literature and participants believed in developing mindsets that considered the real-life intelligences, assets, and identities that students bring with them to school in order to better engage them in the learning process and cultivate their real-world knowledge as “playground intellectuals.”

The literature also described the importance of treating resilience education as an intrinsic process rather than a learned proficiency, one that students must continue to practice and develop throughout their lives. Participants mirrored the importance of understanding this process, where resilience can be investigated as teachable moments or whenever challenging situations arise. It can also be modelled through various school-wide traditions or tasks, where both students and teacher share their resilient characteristics with the whole school or greater community. Most importantly, both the literature and participants’ findings indicated that educators need to constantly reflect and research best practices for implementing the resilience process. These processes need to be flexible, creative and focus on a few concrete programs rather than stringently focusing on many thin or vague approaches. At the same time, resilience education needs to be implemented through a balanced approach, one that deconstructs the negative experiences within students’ lives, without leaving them defenseless, vulnerable or emotionally unsupported in these negative discussions.
Interpretation and Evaluation of Findings

As educators, it is imperative that we understand the diverse set of social justice issues and concepts that can potentially affect our instructional practices, our learning environments, and most importantly our students’ ability to thrive. Teachers’ perceptions towards ideas of risk, resilience and academic achievement help guide their pedagogical approaches towards the creation of engaging programs that ensure successful student development. As teachers look to foster resilience within students who are at-risk, they must first deconstruct the meaning of these terms to better assess how to overcome the barriers that impede these students, while strengthening the protective factors that embrace perseverance.

The participants emphasized how definitions of risk continue to focus on students’ inability to succeed academically. This idea of risk is also connected to the deficit model found throughout the literature and presented within the conventional approach of attributing at-risk labels to students who are predicted to fail to meet educational expectations. This “blaming the student” approach needs to be eradicated and instead of labeling the students based on pre-determinates of failure, educators need to critically assess how risk affects each student and the supports that teachers can provide to help students persist against multiple contexts and factors of risk. Moving forward, the participants emphasized the need to look at the positive rather than the negative, where protective factors can be developed within the classroom and partnered with students’ strengths in order to promote student value, self-efficacy, and ultimately resilience.

While all three participants seemed to be in-sync with regards to defining their perceptions of risk, they seemed to differ on their approach to understanding the meaning of resilience with regards to students’ achievement and success. At the same time, they
each presented similar language that led to the development of an all-encompassing
definition of resilience and future success. Each participant steered away from the deficit
lens of at-risk generalizations and towards a strength-based approach, where resilience is
formed from students’ ability to persevere, cope and learn from past mistakes. This study
exemplified the importance of critically deconstructing and reflecting on past educational
practices and policies, how our mindsets should shift in order to advocate for positive
educational change, and what we need to do in order to abolish the systemic institutional
barriers that reinforce the status quo of failing within education.

In any learning environment, teachers need to assess and understand the
individual needs of each student who walk into their classroom. Without this
understanding, students’ achievement will fall by the way side, thereby causing or
exasperating designations of risk. At the same time, if educators are unaware of their
students’ background, experiences or needs; then resilience education will be rendered
useless because not all students require the same skills or types of supports to become
resilient. Therefore, in order to help students develop into successful and resilient
individuals, the participants pointed to the fact that teachers must determine and
appreciate the personal, social and academic needs of their students. This idea was
supported by my participants’ insistence on developing student identity, caring
relationships, and high expectations for success using real-life applications.

It is essential for educators to interrogate their own teaching practices. This is to
ensure that students receive the best supports and resources necessary in order to develop
into healthy, resilient, and successful individuals. However, as many individuals,
especially those deemed at-risk, are failing to meet the standards of academic
achievement mandated by our schools, teachers should begin to redefine their
instructional practices. These practices not only need to meet the individual needs of their students, but also need to utilize and foster their existing strengths through differentiated instruction. In order to implement engaging pedagogy that will sustain resilience and support academic achievement; my participants spoke to the benefits of utilizing students’ personal, social and, cultural strengths that are reflected through their diverse identities and competences.

Each participant mentioned the importance of formulating inclusive and equitable environments that value students’ different identities, strengths, and ways of thinking. Using practices that are relevant and applicable to students’ lived experiences, my participants believed students’ could see the worth in learning, while developing skills to confront adverse circumstances. Practical intelligence development, asset-based development, and culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy all offer students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in school instruction, while provide them the chance to showcase their mastery of their inherent abilities.

As we embark on new pedagogical practices, it is necessary to reflect and consider exactly what we want to achieve in order to better understand how we can go about achieving it. Our perspectives, experiences, and expectations drive our critical and effective practices and without a deep understanding of our teaching objectives, it is the students who pay the price. This is especially important with regards to resilience education and social justice on a whole, where lacking these professional reflective measures and failing these students, upholds the systemic barriers and phobias that many parent and students face with regards to the education system.

The participants reflected these ideas throughout their interviews, speaking directly to the dangers of repetitive pedagogy, where educators lose focus towards their
initial goals, while at the same time losing student engagement, which is necessary for improvement in resiliency and academic achievement. The participants believed teachers need to take great care in realizing their power with regards to teaching students about resilience and content knowledge. They believed it relies on the teachers’ own enthusiasm, as well as their ability to model and motivate in order to ensure that their students absorb resilient methods that they can use throughout their lives. If educators expect their students to persist and persevere in the face of adversity then they need to guide students towards understanding the value of working hard. In addition, educators need to model that it is more appropriate to set goals that target the controllable issues in our lives in order to be better prepared for the unexpected and uncontrollable challenges that may arise. In this regard, the participants believed in pedagogy that bolsters students’ ability to become advocates of their own self, social, and academic being, while they make important connections to the various inequalities that exist in their world.

The purpose of my research was to investigate the ways in which intermediate school teachers implement pedagogies that help bridge the achievement gap and foster resilience in at-risk youth. Although my findings illustrated various approaches towards facilitating resilience and academic growth, it also provided useful insights towards the healthy development of all students. The themes developed from both the literature and my participants’ findings, highlight the complexities involved with resilience instruction and focuses on the critical lens that we need to acknowledge as we help at-risk youths develop into successful, resilient students. These findings make it clear that pedagogical practice is not the only important factor when determining student resilience and academic achievement.
Implications

This research study offers useful and practical implications with regards to improving students’ achievement within schools, while also informing possible pedagogical approaches that both present and future teachers, including myself, can incorporate into their everyday instructional practices. For instance, this study offers an opportunity to promote awareness with regards to resilience and the need to reconceptualise our teaching mindsets towards more equitable approaches to defining risk, intelligence and academic achievement. However, further research needs to be conducted in order to determine the true value and impact that resilience has with regards to students’ success, while we as teachers continue to reflect on our own processes towards implementing resilient skills in our students’ lives. Resilience education helps cultivate a critical lens, one that helps teachers and students analyze their own abilities and identities within the societal constructs that surround them.

Resilience education and development also helps foster authentic relationships, where teachers and students share their vulnerabilities in order to build deeper learning communities, where we connect and face challenging barriers together. As we share our lived experiences with each other, students begin to create more meaning in their lives, becoming more autonomous and competent as they begin to meet challenges that they know they can endure. This research begins to address methods and benefits towards how teachers might begin to focus on integrating resilience into their classrooms throughout the curriculum. This transdisciplinary implementation of resilience should be applied in the same constant process that you would address learning skills, multiple intelligences and character traits so that students can see the relevance of resilience in multiple contexts.
However, as we move forward with resilience education, we must ensure that we are not just assigning it to the underdog, the at-risk student who has accomplished the “impossible” and succeeded. Resilience is inherent in all individuals and by applying it as a form of praise can in turn reaffirm a deficit approach, labeling students and implying that they are only resilient because they were able to succeed when they were expected to fail. As educators, we must assume that all students are resilient and that it is our joint responsibility to ensure that we all practice and develop the protective factors necessary to stay resilient in all situations. As opportunities for discussing resilience arises out of any challenging circumstance, teachers need to utilize these challenging junctures as teachable moments, where they can model, support and apply the necessary resilient skills directly to the student’s experience. Resilience acts a platform, connecting students’ engagement, strengths and perspectives to academic achievement and ultimately real-life success.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Further study on the subject of resilience education and academic achievement for at-risk students’ is needed. My research study indicated valuable information and data towards describing teachers’ perceptions and pedagogical practices with regards to resilience and achievement; however, more research could provide additional practices and methods for resilience development of all students. As resilience theory is made up of many diverse protective factors and strengths, as well as different risk and contextual factors, further research should investigate the direct impact that educational stakeholders have on the academic achievement and resilience of the student. These studies could address the following questions:
1. Is there or should there be a single, comprehensive framework for resilience?
2. Are there gender differences towards developing resilience?
3. What are the different cultural indicators of resilience?
4. How do teachers directly affect student resilience; how might teachers assess their resilience practices?
5. What impact does resilience have on students’ mental health?
6. How does emotional learning play into resilience and how does it relate to academic achievement?
7. How can we better integrate different ways of thinking and different forms of success into our assessment strategies?

**Conclusion**

As individuals mature into successful, healthy democratic citizens, they must accept that they will inevitably face adverse barriers or challenging situations that will test their will and ability to persevere. In the educational system, students who lack the skills necessary to withstand and prevail against theses antagonistic contexts will ultimately struggle, becoming at-risk and incapable of escaping a system that perpetuates failure and social inequality. However, resilience education offers these students an opportunity to develop the tools and strategies to combat deficit lenses and adverse circumstances, while developing the strengths to thrive in all aspects of their lives. As educators, we inherently attempt to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success; however, sometimes we neglect to focus on resilience as an ongoing, adaptable process that must be continuously practiced and applied to students’ perspectives.

In order to improve the academic achievement of all students, not just at-risk, educators need to implement pedagogies that foster resilience through the validation of students various competencies, strengths and identities. As depicted by the participants, educators need to practice what they preach, constantly reflect on the messaging that they
provide to students and the mindsets that they hold towards their instructional strategies and student abilities. In order to ensure student resiliency, educators need to be the origin of resilience, a standard or beacon that students can follow and appreciate as a beneficial source for learning. As we construct the resilient pathways towards transforming at-risk students into students of promise, we as educators must continue to push against deficit designations; never bowing to the adversities that attempt to disrupt not only our own lives, but those of our students.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the effects that resilience pedagogy implementation has on the academic achievement of at-risk youths for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Dr. Nalini Chandra. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 60 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Joel Browning
Phone number, email: (647) 308-1691, joel.browning@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Arlo Kempf
Phone number: _________________ Email: arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca

Research Supervisor’s Name: Nalini Chandra
Phone #: _________________ Email: nalini.chandra@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date: _____________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Background:
1. How long have you been an educator and where have you taught/teach?
2. What education experiences have you had with grade 7 and/or 8 classes? What is a typical day like with that grade?
3. What does resilience (or strength-based education) mean to you with regards to student achievement or future success?

Definitions:
4. How would you describe an at-risk student?
5. How would you describe a resilient student?
6. What should be the goals in teaching students about resilience in classroom instruction?
7. What are the potential factors that increase or reduce engagement and achievement for all students? (Both internal and external of the school community)

Strategies:
8. From your perspective, what are the benefits and challenges of implementing resilience techniques/strategies into the classroom and school environment?
9. In what ways do/have you integrated resilience strategies, programs, and/or resources into your classroom instruction and educational community? What effects did this have on engagement, academic achievement and/or fostering resilience?

Pedagogies:
10. How have you integrated students’ personal experiences and/or social contexts into the classroom and instructional practices?
11. Can you provide examples where you have implemented/evoked practical intelligence in classroom instruction? How might its implementation in classroom instruction help improve student resilience and achievement?
12. What are asset building development practices (or strength based practices in education?) (Part B: Can you provide examples of implementation into classroom instruction and how does ABD help improve student resilience or achievement?)
13. What is cultural relevant pedagogy? (How have you implemented pedagogies that focus on the diverse cultures/cultural needs of your students? How?) (Part B: Can you provide examples of implementation into classroom instruction and how does CRRP help improve student resilience and/or achievement?)

Conclusion:
14. How can teachers or school communities’ best model resilience for “at risk” youths?
15. What are the hurdles which separate this best practice, from what actually happens on a day-to-day basis in classrooms; both for you personally as a teacher, and school wide?
16. In your opinion, do resilience pedagogies/strategies help improve at-risk student achievement and prepare them for future success? In what ways?
17. What societal factors (out of school context), if any, impede student resiliency, engagement and/or achievement?
18. What societal factors promote student resiliency, engagement, and/or achievement?
19. To what degree, and how, do you consider these factors in your teaching?