

To the University of Wyoming:

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ABSTRACT

Student resiliency refers to the ability to succeed in school regardless of unpleasant circumstances, such as poverty or abuse, and can be measured by the degree of presence of the following components: a sense of well-being, motivation, ability to set goals, development of strong relationships or connections, and stress management (Close & Solberg, 2007). Resiliency has been strongly linked to moral, cognitive, and spiritual development as well academic success, in students (Hanson & Kim, 2007). A growing number of studies have been conducted regarding the development of resiliency through social-emotional learning (SEL). The premise of SEL programs is that students can be taught how to become more resilient and therefore more successful.

This study was conducted to identify the effectiveness of an intensive, brief SEL curriculum, the Discovery Program, on self-ratings of social-emotional assets and resilience of at-risk students at Victory High School, an alternative high school in Freedom County School District 1 (FCSD1). A total of 90 students in three cohorts began the Discovery Program in spring and summer of 2011. Of the 90 students beginning the program, only 45 students completed it. The Success Highways' resiliency inventory, a 108 item computer generated self-reporting assessment, was administered to students on the first and last days of the Program. The Success Highways pre- and post-assessment measured the following resiliency constructs: Importance of School, Confidence, Connections, Stress, Well-Being, and Motivation. The constructs were measured on a five-point Likert Scale. At the end of the program 35 student and 4 teacher interviews were conducted to explore their perceptions of the success of the program.

Analysis of the pre- and post-assessments indicated significant increases in the constructs

–Confidence” and –Importance of School” from start to end of the program. When comparing pre-assessments of students who completed the program with those who did not, students who dropped out of the program rated the constructs –Importance of School” and –Well-Being” significantly lower. Students who completed the program increased their overall resiliency score over the timeframe of the program but the increase was not significant. Analysis of the interview data indicated that the majority of the students perceived they benefited from the program. Teachers also indicated they believed the program was beneficial in increasing student resilience.

EFFECTS OF A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM ON THE RESILIENCY OF
STUDENTS AT RISK

By
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DEDICATION

I am dedicating this dissertation to my wonderful FAMILY.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) was to close the achievement gap between the highest and lowest performing students and to provide all students the opportunity to succeed in school and in life. However, many variables can impact children's ability to achieve their full potential; such factors include living in poverty (Neuman, 2008), transience and homelessness (Bearsley-Smith, Bond, Littlefield, & Thomas, 2008), having limited-English proficiency, and having a dysfunctional or abusive home life (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Children in these situations are deemed at risk of failing and dropping out of school. More specific behaviors that contribute to students being at-risk include the following: participation in unsafe sex and teenage pregnancy (Habel, Dittus, De Rosa, Chung, & Kerndt, 2010), drug and alcohol abuse (Healthy Youth Survey, 2010), truancy and high absenteeism, and involvement in crime and illegal activities (Haveman, Wolfe, & Wilson, 2001).

Increasing numbers of students at risk in schools multiply the challenges for educational administrators, particularly in terms of the graduation rate and making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A major component of NCLB (2002) is increasing the graduation rate. Further mandated by NCLB, all school districts are required to make AYP and continue to be evaluated on how well demographic subgroups of students perform on state tests. Furthermore, for districts to be deemed proficient and achieve AYP, they are required to annually raise scores in subgroups year-to-year (Hanson, Muller, Austin, Lee-Bayha, 2004), as well increase graduation rates. Subgroup categories include ethnicity/race, low socio-economic status such as free and reduced lunch status, and special education.

The fact that many of the students who drop out of school also score lower on state tests provides a dual challenge—keeping at-risk students in schools and raising their achievement levels and graduation rates. As a nation, our average graduation rate rose from 72 percent to 75.5 percent between 2002 and 2009. This rise reflects concentrated efforts by many states to develop and implement strategies such as alternative schools to keep students from dropping out. One key factor in prodding states to act has been federal pressure — most notably, the NCLB (2002).

The task for schools and districts is therefore to simultaneously increase student test scores, reduce the drop-out rate, and raise the graduation rate. According to Lehr, Lanners, and Lange (2003), “Meeting the needs of students disenfranchised from the traditional education system is becoming more and more important as we are faced with a growing population of students for whom the status quo is not successful” (p. 1). Student resilience has been identified as an important factor in retention of students at risk in school. According to Lifton (1994) resilience is an innate ‘self-righting’ system. More explicitly, it is —the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risk (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 202). According to Beland (2007), the process of becoming resilient involves the development and implementation of skills in social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is a process through which students enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behaving to achieve important life task developing skills so that they can recognize and deal with their emotions, develop positive relationships, resolve problems that occur, motivate themselves to accomplish a goal, make reliable decisions, and avoid risky behaviors (Beland, 2007).

One avenue toward increasing resiliency in students may lie with SEL instruction in schools (Harlacher & Merrell, 2011). Within the school setting, SEL can be accomplished through infusing skills lessons into the curricula, whole school practice, classroom practice, and

by creating an environment of safety, respect, and caring. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of an SEL curriculum (the Discovery Program) at Victory High School, the alternative high school in Cheyenne, Wyoming, on the resiliency of students at risk as well as to identify effective strategies for engaging this population.

Background to the Problem

Student achievement continues to be at the forefront of our nation's issues. Over the past decade, the accountability movement driven by NCLB (2002) has brought increasing attention to ensuring students are proficient in basic skills and reducing student dropout from high school. Schools continue to receive funding based on student success. Each state must assess student achievement annually and report its process. Sanctions are applied to Title 1 Schools that do not make required AYP. Schools that receive Title 1 funds are the public schools enrolling at least 40% of students from low-income families and which receive additional federal funding (US Department of Education, n.d.). The stakes for schools and districts deemed not proficient are high, because they must endeavor to provide avenues of success for all students including those at risk of academic failure and dropping out of school.

The report, *Left behind in America: the Nation's Dropout Crisis*, indicated that in 2007, 16% of individuals between 16 and 24 years of age (nearly 6.2 million people) were high school dropouts (Center for Labour Market Studies, 2009). Individuals who drop out are not only at risk of not finding a good paying job or obtaining a job (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009; Rouse, 2005), but they are also likely to die earlier, become a teen parent, to get into trouble with law enforcement, and in addition, their children are more likely to become a high school dropout themselves (Haveman, Wolfe, & Wilson, 2001). Therefore, for the economic and social well-being of our society, it is our collective responsibility to explore every potential means to

provide students the opportunity to complete high school” (Center for Labour Market Studies, 2009, p. ii). According to Neuman (2009),

The single best determinant of a school’s likely output is a single input —the characteristics of the entering children. The painful truth is that we have done almost nothing to raise or change the trajectory of achievement for our disadvantaged children. (p.582)

Consequently, many of the students entering school do not have the social emotional skills needed to maneuver the education system and become students at risk.

Characteristics of Students At Risk

A high percentage of dropouts send distress signals long before they actually drop out, such as poor grades from as far back as sixth grade. They also tend to have low test scores in math and English and attend school only 80% of the time (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). Family backgrounds may also be an indicator for dropping out of school: for example coming from a single-parent home; having permissive parents; having poor relationships with peers, and family may receive public assistance, parents are unemployed, and English is not the primary language in home. In addition, many have parents who also did not graduate from high school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Schools must provide students opportunities to overcome these disadvantages and be successful in school. Many districts have opened alternative high schools to cater to students with at-risk factors and who are unsuccessful in traditional schools.

Alternative High Schools

Alternative high schools serve highly vulnerable youth with multiple risk factors and whose lives are filled with instability. These schools are charged with meeting at-risk students’ needs and providing alternative ways of helping them stay in school. Alternative schools are

required to meet the same state standards that other schools must achieve (Austin, Dizon, Beliner, & Baley 2008). Alternative high schools can fall into two categories: The “school-within-a-school” model that targets “at-risk” students who have not yet dropped out of school, and a second model encompassing stand-alone alternative schools that are outside the established public schools (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2007). Broadly stated, both types of alternative schools aim to lower the dropout rate and increase attendance, build student engagement, develop student self-esteem, and help students cope with the challenges and problems that contribute to their likelihood of dropping out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2007). Such alternative high schools generally have additional curricula that focus on building strengths, skills and student resiliency.

Resiliency

Resiliency is the “ability to rebound from adversity and development active, healthy, and successful learning...[and] should be available to all young people in their homes, schools, community, and through their peers” (Austin, 2002, p.1). According to Austin, long-term studies of positive youth development of students at risk who have faced such obstacles as situational threats, life’s stresses, and risky behaviors, focus on principles that make the positive differences in these students’ lives. Such principles include fostering caring relationships, having high expectations, and providing opportunities for participation and contribution in positive activities (Austin, 2002). All of these types of supports and opportunities have been referred to as protective factors and have been linked to the development of resiliency. Social emotional learning (SEL) has been identified as a means of increasing students’ resiliency, and consequently their academic achievement.

Social and Emotional Learning

Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) presented a structure for understanding how social and emotional awareness can influence students' academic performance by enhancing their ability to become more socially aware in their daily life: Strategies include learning about and practicing emotional management, self-management, responsible decision making, and relationship management. If youth are not aware of their emotions, they will find it difficult to make rational decisions, manage impetuous actions, or say what they really mean (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Youth need to realize going along to avoid conflict may not be their best option, but being able to say no assertively and yet maintain positive relationships leads to positive social, emotional growth for a lifetime (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). Several SEL programs have been implemented to address student resiliency skills. One of these is the Discovery Program.

This particular program was chosen to be implemented in Victory High School on the basis of the findings of Larsen and Timpson (2001). The alternative high school program started by Larsen and Timpson became the model for Victory High School due to its similarity in population, location, and student issues. A grant was written to fund the project and Larsen became a consultant for Victory High School for the timeframe 2011 to 2014.

Discovery Program

Larsen and Timpson (2001) developed the Discovery Program to teach interpersonal skills to students at risk entering the alternative high school setting. The Discovery Program focuses on teaching students how to understand themselves and their relationships, and concentrates on developing their ability to work with others effectively and ethically. The curriculum includes the following lessons: Effective groups, anger management, communication

skills, assertiveness training, problem solving, and conflict resolution (Larsen & Timpson, 2001). The Discovery Program also includes teacher strategies for developing a classroom culture that includes social skills, behavioral management strategies, and experiential activities. The curriculum's objectives include developing a strong sense of community and establishing positive support systems for all students. It provides teaching, practice, as well as feedback to students on social skills, and reinforces the culture of the classroom/school to ensure that all students understand what is expected of them, and in turn, what they may expect from the staff. Successful completion of the Discovery Program is dependent on attendance, following the school rules, and demonstrating a commitment to respecting self and others, passing all tests with at least a 70%, as well as passing the final Discovery examination.

Statement of the Problem

Students enrolled in alternative high schools generally have similar demographic factors that frequently relate to increased jeopardy of dropping out (Jerald, 2007). These factors include: a) low-income family, b) minority, c) male, d) a single-parent family, e) emotional or learning disability, f) moving frequently, and g) over-aged and under credited (Jerald, 2007). Students also share at-risk characteristics such as being parents, having to work a substantial number of hours, struggling academically, receiving low or failing grades, having poor attendance, as well as having poor relationships with teachers and peers (Jerald, 2007). SEL, as a process to increase student resiliency, has been recognized as a key factor in reducing student dropout. Research has shown that there is direct relationship between SEL and individual skill building in the areas of making decisions, solving problems, and communication. Components of SEL support school health-based prevention programs aimed at reducing high-risk behaviors (Elias & Weissberg, 2004). Because SEL curriculum was designed to directly strengthen resiliency assets, there is an

increased need to measure students' actual social, emotional, and resiliency competencies before and after implementation of the SEL curriculum (Lube & Eloff, 2004).

Freedom County School District 1 has implemented many programs for students at risk over the years; however, frequently there has not been a 'best practices' measurement in place to assess the effectiveness of those programs. The Discovery Program is a SEL curricula currently being implemented at Victory High School in an effort to increase students' overall success. Currently, there is little research on the success of the Discovery Program as a strategy for student achievement at Victory High School. Additionally, evaluation of new programs/curricula has frequently been somewhat of an afterthought in efforts to implement social and emotional curriculum or other school-based curricula (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Therefore, along with the need to assess student learning and growth in a new program, it is also important to have a tool to measure program results by using a data-driven approach to evaluate the success of the program in increasing student resiliency and identify effective strategies to work with students at risk. Resilience has currently been conceptualized as a dynamic process consisting of a series of ongoing, reciprocal transactions between individuals and their environment (Masten, 2001). More specifically, resiliency can be measured through the use of an instrument such as the Success Highways' assessment that calculates personal perceptions on motivation, ability to connect with others and sustain connections, how stress is impacting one's life, personal well-being, level of confidence, and belief about the importance of school (Gillis & Sidivy, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine if there was any significant increase in student resiliency after participation in the nine-week long Discovery Program. Using the Success Highways assessment to measure resiliency before and after the Program, and student and

teacher interviews this study explored the impact of the Discovery Program at Victory High School. The following are the research questions that guided the study.

Research Questions

Five research questions were formulated to guide this study.

- 1(a) How do students' perceptions of their resiliency as indicated by six constructs [(i) importance of school, (ii) confidence, (iii) connections, (iv) stress, (v) well-being, and (vi) motivation] change after participating in the Discovery Program?
- 1(b) What are the teachers' perceptions of the effect of SEL on student resiliency?
- 2 Are there differences in pre-program perceptions of the six resiliency constructs between students who complete the program and those who do not?
- 3 Are there differences in gender, race and grade level between students who complete the program and those who do not?
- 4 What are students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the Discovery Program?
- 5 What SEL strategies do teachers perceive are most effective in increasing student resilience?

Context

Victory High School is a part of Freedom County School District (FCSD1). With a total population of 13,349 students, FCSD1 is the largest district in a western state. FCSD1 serves students from urban and rural communities. Victory High School is the only alternative high school in FCSD1 educating students at risk who have been unsuccessful in the traditional school settings. Victory High School's average enrollment is approximately 180 students ranging from 14 to 20 years of age. Students come to Victory through referrals from the FCSD1's traditional high schools, parents, peers, community agencies such as the community college, and self-referrals.

Over the years FCSD1 has implemented several programs to improve at-risk student success; however, none of these have been successful in raising student achievement. Therefore, in 2010 Victory High School implemented a new social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, the Discovery Program, in an effort to meet the social and emotional needs of its at-risk population, which includes students with mental illness and health problems, students from broken homes, and students who lack parental support. Entry to Victory High School is dependent on students and their guardians attending an initial orientation with administrative staff. When admitted, they begin the nine-week Discovery Program. Students who successfully complete the discovery Program continue in the mainstream population at Victory High School.

Significance of the Study

The objective of the Discovery Program is to increase student resilience and provide them with skills to be successful in school and in life outside school. This study explores the degree to which student resiliency was impacted by participating in the Program and student and teacher perception of the effectiveness of the Program. Identifying best practices in working with students at risk may lead to insights for FCSD1, families, neighborhood groups, and support agencies on how to enhance community, reduce problem behaviors, increase motivation, and create greater productivity in students at risk (Brooks, 2006). Findings may also be transferable to alternative and traditional schools in other districts and states. Results of this study may suggest areas of developmental needs for youth that can be addressed by those who work with them to promote academic and social success; it may indicate how schools can have the most effect in those areas and what challenges alternative education must address to bridge students' deficits (Benard, 2004).

Findings of this study may stimulate LCDS1 administrators to review and implement resiliency strategies to promote asset development in all students so that they may increase their skills and have the opportunity to be successful academically and socially in their school, home and community environments (Austin, 2002).

Overview of the Methodology

This study employed a mixed method approach. It used a quantitative pre- and post-assessment the Success Highways Assessment (Appendix A) to assess the student participants' perceptions of their resiliency before and after the Discovery Program. In addition, qualitative data were collected by interviews with students and teachers after Program completion. Participants were three cohorts of students enrolled in the spring and summer quarters of 2011 in the Discovery Program, and their teachers.

Limitations of the Study

Student participants in this research project were not representative of all of FCSD1 schools. The sample was not randomly selected to represent FCSD1; rather, it was composed of alternative high school students from all areas of the city and district who attended the Program during the timeframe of the study.

It is also important to understand that these findings reflect the perceptions of students, and their teachers, not necessarily the reality of the school.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined as pertains to their particular usage in this study.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title 1 of the NCLB Act 2001.

Autonomy the strength in the category of autonomy entails development of positive identity, internal locus of control, and a belief in the ability to be successful.

Discovery Program is a flexible, skills-based social and emotional learning curriculum designed to increase secondary student's positive social skills and support their academic achievement and their success outside of school (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

Emotional Intelligence is the concept of emotional intelligence, also known as EQ, (Goldman, 1999). Studies have shown that people with high levels of EQ tend to be more successful than those with low or average EQ in spite of exhibiting higher IQs. Skills and attitudes of EQ such as self-control, zeal, and persistence, and the ability to motivate oneself match the skills and attitudes that resilience research has identified as promoting life success (Austin, 2002).

Problem Solving involves several skills in regard to academic success for example: planning, ingenious, resourceful critical thinking skills, and the ability to learn skills.

Resiliency is individuals' ability to keep coming back, again, and again, and again. No matter how many times life throws a curve or brings them to their knees, they try again – they try something new, something different, or something old in a new way. Hanson and Kim (2007) defined resilience as the ability to rebound from adversity and achieve healthy development and successful learning.

Self-Efficacy is defined as an individual's belief about their capabilities to produce specific levels of performance that influence events in their lives. These beliefs determine how individuals feel, think, act, and motivate themselves (Bandura, 1994).

Social competency is defined as children's strengths in communication, empathy and caring, and the ability to confidently connect to others (Hanson & Kim 2007).

Social Emotional Learning is structured into four groups: awareness of self and others; positive attitudes and values; responsible decision making; and social interactions skills (Payton, et al., 2000)

Chapter Summary and Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter One has provided the background to the study, outlined the problem being studied, detailed the purpose, the research questions, provided an overview of the methodology and significance of the research, and defined the terms used in the study. Chapter Two reviews the literature on alternative schools, students at risk and their needs, as well as consequences of dropping out of school, resiliency and resiliency programs that motivate and teach SEL skills. Chapter Three explores the research methodology, the design, data collection, analysis of data, research ethics, and provide a description of the researcher's background. Chapter Four reports the findings and Chapter Five discusses the findings, and makes recommendations for practice and further research.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Relevant Literature and Research

This chapter focuses on literature associated with NCLB, characteristics of students at risk and consequences of dropping out of school, alternative schools, resiliency, and the importance of implementing resiliency skills through the use of SEL curriculum.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) was enacted as a measure to close the achievement gap between the highest and lowest performing students as well as to provide independent accountability for all subgroups in each school. Of concern is the increasingly large number of students evidencing at-risk behaviors. This group has created multiple challenges for school administrators, teachers, and staff and many of these individuals eventually dropout of school. A major component of NCLB for high schools is the mandate to increase the graduation rate, and a challenge which has become complicated as the at-risk population rises. Further mandated by NCLB, all schools and districts are required to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Research has shown that at-risk students achieve at lower levels (McCall, 2003), which is a further concern as all districts are evaluated on how well demographic subgroups of students perform on state tests. To achieve AYP, schools are required to annually raise scores in all subgroups (Hanson, Muller, Austin, Lee-Bayha, 2004). Subgroup categories include ethnicity/race, low socio-economic status that is based on free and reduced lunch status, as well as special education. The greater the number of at-risk students in schools and districts the more difficult it becomes to meet AYP.

Characteristics of Students at Risk

Students may leave regular educational facilities and attend alternative high schools because they have become, by definition, an at-risk student. Students at risk possess outward signs that they have begun to disengage from school. According to McCall (2003), one piece of evidence that student is becoming dysfunctional or at-risk of dropping out of school includes referrals to the principal's office for behavioral issues such as classroom disruptions, defiance, and not following directions. Such behaviors often lead to falling behind academically, which in turn leads to the need for academic remediation. Students' social skills may become dysfunctional and they may have problems with the school staff, issues in the community and in the home (McCall, 2003). It is not uncommon for students who exhibit behavioral and academic issues to also have family and community problems. Abuse is another factor impacting at-risk status (McCall, 2003). Students with issues in their home, with family and/or peers and as well as the community may become chronically absent. McCall (2003) identified students who attend school for 80% or less of the required time as "phantom participants" or "drop-ins." Rouse (2005) found that based on student history students who drop out are absent 20 or more times during the previous school year, have been retained in at least one grade, earn low grades, demonstrate disciplinary problems or disruptive behaviors, and have attended five or more schools during a lifetime.

Some personal or psychological characteristics of students at risk of dropping out are low self-esteem, having at least one disability (for example, ADHD, learning disabilities), possessing poor peer relationships, suffering from depression or other emotional disability, participating in early sexual activity or promiscuity, and substance abuse (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Additionally, students at risk may have adult responsibilities such as a child to care for and/or

working to support the family. Family backgrounds that may be indicators for students at risk of dropping out include coming from a single-parent home, English is not their primary language, parents did not graduate, parents are unemployed, family receive public assistance, in addition parents with poor parenting skills (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

The federal definition describes students at risk in 9th thru 12 grade as individuals who are discouraged learners, and for whatever reason do not achieve in the standard high school programs (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). They usually have poor attendance, habitual truancy, academic failure, teenage pregnancy, and over 25% of American youth fit into this description. A standardized answer for why youth drop out of school is that high school lacks relevancy (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Consequences of Dropping Out

Young people who do not complete high school may face many more difficulties in their life than those who graduate. Not only do dropouts earn less and have fewer job opportunities, but they also significantly impact the nation socially because of higher incidences of crime. Economically dropouts impact the country with uninsured health incidents, as well as lost tax revenue from their low income status (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Rouse (2005) estimated that lifetime earnings for dropouts were approximately \$260,000 less than for high school graduates. If the current dropout trend continues, nearly 13 million students will drop out over the next ten years (Rouse, 2005).

Students who drop out of school have on average a shorter life expectancy, are more likely to be a teen parent, are more likely to have health problems, and moreover their children are more likely to drop out of school (Muennig, 2005). Dropouts are more apt to commit crimes,

rely on government healthcare, and use other public services such as food stamps or housing assistance (Raphael, 2004).

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) have shown that the unemployment rate for high school dropouts in July 2009 was 15.4%, compared to 9.4% for high school graduates, 7.9 0% for individuals with some college credits or an associate's degree, and 4.70% for individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Everyone benefits when high school students graduate. The graduates themselves have more opportunities for employment/careers, earn higher wages, and enjoy more comfortable and secure lifestyles (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). High school graduates live longer, and are more likely to raise healthier, better-educated children. In fact, children of parents who have graduated will be more likely to also graduate. Graduates commit fewer crimes and positively participate in society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that educational opportunities are provided that promote high school graduation and cater to the needs of students at risk. Providing students at risk with an alternative school is one way for them to help them to graduate.

Alternative Schools

Alternative schools for students at risk have been in existence for many years (Raywid, 2001). Increasingly, alternative school settings are being used to attempt to bring dropouts back to school and support them in school until they graduate (Raywid, 2001). Alternative schools for current students and possible dropouts rely mainly on forming small learning communities where both teachers and students feel empowered and in which curriculum and learning go beyond the NCLB Act's (2001) narrow independence on standardized tests (Zin, et al, 2004).

Alternative schools also may have varied financial platforms for example the school may be under the umbrella of a parent school, sponsored by a corporation such as Bill Gates, or funded through the local school district (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). In recognition of the financial impact as a result of poor attendance and student dropouts on the average daily attendance (ADM), many school districts have begun establishing separate educational programs for students at risk as a method of recapturing lost revenues as well as raising graduation rates (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Alternative schools cater to students who may have challenges such as discipline problems, teen pregnancy, gang related issues, and poor attendance patterns. Alternative schools may offer accelerated programs for receiving credits as their student population is usually over-aged and under-credited (McMahon, Browning, & Rose-Colley, 2001). In Philadelphia, contract schools have filled a gap for such students who have dropped out and returned to school (McMahon, Browning, & Rose-Colley, 2001). One way the Philadelphia School District has tried to turn the dropout rate around has been by changing a section of an existing school into an alternative contract school (McMahon, Browning, & Rose-Colley, 2001). Contract schools have negotiated a contract with the Philadelphia School District for funding per pupil to finance the contract school. While students do not have to pay to attend the school, they may be required to purchase a uniform. Philadelphia School District is responsible for monitoring the contract schools and has the liberty to renew or terminate the school's contract. Annually, contract alternative schools negotiate the next year's funding with the school district (McMahon, et al., 2001).

Schooling for students at risk in New York has been in existence for many years due to its unusually high drop-out rate (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In New York, in the 2007-08 school

year, alternative school programs served over 9,000 students. Alternative schools in New York are generally small, usually designed by the teaching staff, create some elements of choice for the staff as well as the students, are exempt from standard bureaucratic procedures, and most importantly, have developed a sense of community in the school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). By offering programs that provide more flexible schedules and are personalized education experience, alternative high schools have been able to prevent some of the dropout problems.

A second alternative school option in New York is located in the Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC). This program serves students who are considering dropping out or have dropped out and have returned to school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). YABC served over 5,500 students during the 2007-08 school year. Once the students have completed the necessary classes to graduate, they receive a diploma from their regular high school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Staff Development

Alternative school staff spends considerable time and effort in motivating reluctant students, and fostering academic and interpersonal growth to ensure student success; therefore, most staff development is focused on turning problems into opportunities (McCall, 2003), such as specific skills for teachers and support staff to be able to connect with reluctant students. Newkirk and Rutstein (2000) observed that 90% of teachers do not feel comfortable handling a crisis and so conflict resolution training is also an area high need.

Creating Cultural Safety

Staff also needs to be proficient in creating a culture of safety. Newkirk and Rutstein (2000) found that unless they experience a safe environment, all students, but especially students of color will continue to drop out in droves. Kauffman (2000) suggested that alternatives schools as well as mainstream schools use a model for organizing schools focused on belonging, mastery

learning, independence, and generosity to build cultural safety. Another aspect of positive schools, as well as a must have for alternative schools, is building a positive school culture and creating respect among staff and students. Marginalized students are drawn to other students who share their perspective of being an educational outcast. Teachers catering to students at risk have described an avenue for creating “school spirit” as a means to celebrate communities belonging and respecting each other to create a positive school climate (Lantieri, 2001).

Successful teachers of students at risk tend to have two unique competencies: the ability to connect to students who fear or dislike teachers and the ability to pull success from students who have experienced failure, which builds resiliency for students at risk. In turn, increased resilience may provide the impetus for at-risk students to try to remain in school and graduate (Lantieri, 2001).

Resiliency

Since schools have been primarily focused on cognitive behaviors and the acquisition of academic skills demonstrated through annual testing, there has been less emphasis on youth development, which appears to be neither readily measurable, nor deemed important as a school accountability measure (Hanson & Kim, 2007). Yet, a growing body of research strongly suggests that promoting the social, emotional, physical, moral, cognitive, and spiritual development of our youth does demonstrate a strong correlation to indicators of academic performance and success (Hanson & Kim, 2007).

Resiliency refers to the ability to succeed in school regardless of unpleasant circumstances, such as poverty or abuse and includes components such as confidence, a sense of well-being, motivation, an ability to set goals, strong relations and or connections, and stress management (Close & Solberg, 2007). Benard (2004) acknowledged four overlapping categories

of strength in youth who incur adversity which build resiliency: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Bondy, Ross, Galligane & Hambacher, 2007). Social competency is a key part of resilience and has been defined as children's strength in communication, empathy and caring. Problem solving involves several skills relevant to academic success such as: planning, resourcefulness, critical thinking skills, and the ability to learn skills. Autonomy entails development of a positive self-identity, internal locus of control, and a belief in one's ability to be successful. Finally, having a sense of purpose allows goal-setting and follow through (Bondy, et al., 2007). In addition, emotional regulation is an integral part of resilience. Vanderbilt and Shaw (2008) referred to emotional regulation as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify the intensity and duration of emotional reaction to reach a desired goal.

Long-term studies across several disciplines have identified principles of positive youth development and suggest that opportunities help provide an environment in which resiliency will increase. Students who have had positive opportunities tend to exhibit the following characteristics: a caring personality, an ability to build relationships, high expectations, and a willingness to give individuals opportunities for participation and contribution (Austin, 2002). Such attributes lead to the ability to rebound from adversity and achieve healthy development and successful learning. These elements should be present in all environments in a young person's world: home, school, community, and peers (Austin, 2002).

Austin (2002) defined resiliency factors as twofold, comprising external and internal assets. External assets, also known as developmental or protective supports, include caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in the four distinct, yet inter-related, environments of school, home, community, and peer group. When

these external assets are present, students are more likely to be academically successful, better equipped to cope with problems, and less likely to exhibit risky behaviors. Many of the support mechanisms and skills that students require to be successful need to be present not only within the school environment but also beyond, in home, community and peer-group interactions (Adelman & Taylor, 2005).

In a study that followed 700 individuals from birth to adulthood, Hanson and Kim (2007) recognized the existence of a committed caregiver, community support arrangement, and pro-social skills were the three most influential predictors that children at risk would grow up to be healthy, contributing adults (Hansen & Kim, 2007). Caring relationships, messages of high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution are important factors sustaining positive youth development and contributing to academic success (Hansen & Kim, 2007). Students who develop the individual characteristics that define healthy behaviors and successful learning and who protect themselves from health-risk behaviors are more likely to be successful at school, in their family life, and community (Austin, 2002).

Resiliency can significantly affect school and life outcomes for students, including academic success, even for students who are faced with great adversity (Zins, et al., 2004). Furthermore, these skills can be learned, measured, and have lasting effects on academic performance (Zins, et al., 2004). While acquiring skills can increase a child's ability to be more resilient, students' perception of their teachers' and guardians' roles in their life can have definite long-term effect.

Educators' Roles in Resiliency and Social Competency Development

While one of the primary resources for normal development of a child is the presence of a guardian who will provide material goods, such as food and shelter, and abstract necessities,

such as love, safety, and security (Obradovic, Burt, & Masten, 2006), other adult mentors, especially teachers, community members from areas such as health, educational, religious, cultural, recreational, and social services organizations play a large role in development of child self-concept (Fergus & Zimmerman 2005). Resilience is not the result of innate abilities, but rather a capacity available for all children build through support from family, teachers, administrators, community members, peers, and significant people in their lives (Benard, 2004).

Teachers who are empathetic and demonstrate they care play a large role in student success. According to Hanson and Kim (2007), students consider a teacher who cares for them exhibits the following traits: is a good listener, sets high expectations, expects responsibility from the student, praises successes, and encourages the student through setbacks. Brown (2004) noted that teachers who established and communicated clear, high expectations with an attitude of “no excuses” developed a climate of respect, a safe place to learn and create a climate where students could take risks, laugh, and trust one another as well as with their teacher.

In addition to providing emotional and academic support, teachers do play an essential role in modeling the resilient behaviors desired from their students (Waxman, 2004). For example, teachers can make students aware that adversity is temporary and teach and help them develop skills to overcome it. Teachers can also display excitement over learning and building knowledge that can be used to build individual students’ interest base. Finally, the power of relationships between teachers and students can transcend prescriptive approaches in developing resiliency in students (Waxman, 2004).

All students do want to learn even if they feel or seem unmotivated or unengaged; they may believe they lack ability to achieve in school; however, students who have educators with a positive mindset as well as believe students do want to learn have a profound effect on student

resiliency (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007). Waxman (2004) found that a key element in developing resiliency and empowering students was not necessarily derived from programmatic approaches, but rather resided in teachers building deeper relationships with students, being knowledgeable, open and accepting of the child's life situation, providing a structured environment focused on appropriate behavioral and high academic expectations, and having a willingness to share power with students (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007). When teachers are empathetic, reliable, support students to self-manage, and allow students to make decisions, classroom management climate is enhanced. Conversely, the overall level of school connectedness is lower in schools that long-term suspend or expel students for relatively minor violations, such as possessing alcohol, compared to schools with more relaxed discipline policies (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

Relationships, connectedness, and feelings of community in environments where teachers and administrators collaborate with students and parents to scrutinize definitions of success and have the means to calculate and achieve it are most important (McMahon, 2007). Administrators must work proactively to create respecting, welcoming communities that give parents confidence to be equal partners in their child's education. Educators dedicated to a climate that focuses on potential and promise rather than on shortfalls and scarcity are well situated to provide meaningful opportunities for student participation and leadership. Resilience-building pedagogical approaches and strategies that encourage students and teachers to challenge existing insufficiencies can be facilitated through open dialogue with students, parents, and communities (Hanson, 2002; McMahon, 2007). Long-term studies of at-risk student progress in the face of societal danger, stress, and risk, consistently identify collaborative practices among all stakeholder groups as having impact on student success (Hanson & Kim, 2007). While teacher

support may help student success, the process of support is threefold - the presence of a committed caregiver, along with a broad community support system, and an engaging social skills program (Hanson, et al., 2005).

Resiliency Linked to Academic Success

Numerous studies on resiliency have recognized a correlation between student resiliency and academic success, especially in lower socioeconomic populations. For example, findings from a longitudinal study by Roehikepartain, Mannes, Scales, Lewis, and Bolstrom, (2004) indicated that higher levels of resiliency characteristics were strongly associated with higher grade point averages for middle and high school students. These results maintained genuine over time, so that students reporting more resiliency traits initially in the study still maintained higher grade point averages three years later, compared to those students with fewer resiliency assets at the start of the study (Roehikepartain, et al., 2004). However, not only do students at risk need resiliency skills, it is also important to successful students. Students with high IQs may be more likely to demonstrate increased academic success at school, to effectively process information and problem solve, to contend with the challenges and stresses of school, and to adopt social norms leading to integration into pro-social peer groups, if they have high levels of resilience (Masten, 2009).

According to Hanson and Austin (2002), findings of research conducted in the California school system through the use of the Healthy Kids Survey (HKS) suggested that resiliency indicators were positively correlated to higher test scores. The largest increase was associated with schools where students reported higher levels of resiliency. Furthermore, the use of resiliency curricula, SEL, proved to be equally beneficial for improved tests score in both high and low performing schools (Hanson & Austin, 2003).

Toldson (2008), in his study *Breaking Barriers*, identified four social, emotional, and cognitive factors that contributed to academic success of black males:

1. personal and emotional factors, emotional and self-esteem;
2. family factors which included family relationships, parents' educational levels;
3. social and emotional factors, their economic standard and community involvement;
4. school elements, how well they are prepared for school and relationships with educational staff.

In general, cognitive factors found in *Breaking Barriers* may also contribute to the success of social emotional learning. Many school systems in the United States have begun to realize the positive impact of incorporating SEL into school curriculum in order to provide students with the ability to constructively engage in caring and respectful relationships (Lantieri, 2008).

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning (SEL) refers to the range of skills and cognitive abilities students must acquire to traverse effectively through school and life challenges (Masten, 2001). SEL has been linked to academic success (Zins, et al. , 2004). Johnson and Johnson (2004) demonstrated how SEL can be used for cooperative learning when communicating with others and for problem solving. A major premise of SEL is that resiliency skills can be taught and learned much like skills in other academic areas such as and language arts and science (Merrell & Gurdner, 2010). One of the goals of SEL is to motivate students to participate in their school communities. Participation with higher levels of enthusiasm in school not only motivated students to socially develop but also strengthened their academic success (Zins, et al., 2004). The

use of SEL curriculum to support students' resiliency development is an essential element in developing students SEL skills.

Social Emotional Curriculum

Elias and Weissberg (2000) acknowledged previous studies by Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which identified several indicators of a successful SEL curriculum that benefits all students, but especially students at risk. These include communicating effectively; ability to work with others; maintain self-control and express oneself correctly; compassion and ability to have perspective; positive, sense of humor and self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses; capability to set goals and to plan; nonviolently problem-solving, and the ability to reflect on decision and life goals.

CASEL (2011) outlined a premise for teachers to develop lesson plans to focus on four major domains as an effective method for reaching not only students at risk, but all students:

1. life skills and social competencies;
2. ability to handle stress skills, conflict management, social support for getting through drama;
3. abilities to promote healthy habits and positive behavior management; and
4. having a bright outlook on life and gave back to the community (Elias & Weissberg, 2000).

Most SEL curricula provide opportunities for students to identify skills they have in their lives; model and teach new ways of handling life's situations; give opportunities for feedback from students, and provide students with cues to be used out of the classroom setting for self-monitoring in stressful situations (Elias & Weissberg, 2000). The Discovery Program is an example of one of several SEL curricula.

Discovery Program

Research has shown that failing middle and high schools usually share three common factors: students do not perform well in academics; they have high dropout rates; and the student population is usually of lower socioeconomic status (Belfanz & Legters, 2004).

The Discovery Program has been designed to provide SEL skills in a flexible environment to increase secondary students' positive social skills and support their academic success in and outside of school. The curriculum focuses on these core objectives: to develop in students a strong sense of community; to teach, practice, and provide feedback to students on specific SEL skills, and to ensure that all students develop an understanding for the classroom/school culture and expectations for the students and what to expect from the teaching staff (Merrell, Tom, & Larsen, 2001). Larsen and Timpson (2001) created the Discovery Program built on the following five resilience principles.

1. *Effective Groups* emphasizes cooperation, synergy, appropriate risk-taking, and positive mental attitudes.
2. *Anger Management* uses a cognitive approach to manage frustration and anger by re-teaching students' anger and using it in a positive manner.
3. *Communication Skills* shows students the difference between aggressive, assertive, and passive manners and reactions.
4. *Problem Solving* focuses on solving problems in a systematic way using a sequence of steps: stop, list, choose, do, and evaluate.
5. *Conflict Resolution* concentrates on conflict and ways to manage conflict.

While students are in the Discovery Program, they remain with the same teacher and group of students for nine weeks in which they are learning resiliency skills. This closeness with

their peers and teachers provides students with many of the elements they are missing in a larger learning environment, such as time to learn social competency in a trusting environment (Larsen & Timpson, 2001). The Discovery program follows a routine of grounding and physical activities. Grounding takes approximately 30 minutes a day and asks students to “check-in” by 1) stating their name; 2) using a word to describe their emotions at that moment; 3) and honestly and openly responding to a daily prompt. Students participate daily in a physical activity such as volleyball or another physical activity that meets the standard in the physical education program, which also provides them an opportunity to work in groups and receive a physical education credit. Other activities and units in which the students participate are ropes course/challenge course, autobiographies, fine arts, “Breaking Through Denial” a program focused on breaking free of chemical dependency, graduation, and gifts. On completion of the program they receive a certificate.

The ropes course/challenge course is completed approximately halfway through the program to reinforce the principles learned in the classroom. This activity cements the group and is mandatory for all students to participate. Students work through an array of challenges while helping each other to complete the tasks involved such as building trust, assessing appropriate risk, team building, and comfort zones that were processed throughout each lesson (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

Autobiographies are utilized to guide students through their life story. The only person who reads the students’ life stories is the teacher, unless the student has revealed through the writing assignment, legal and ethical issues such as actual or potential injury to self, others, or any kind of child abuse (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

Fine art activities include daily hands-on components in which students create a project such as a handmade quilt, stained glass window, or sculpture. These art activities are symbolic of their life experiences during their time in the Discovery program. At the end of the nine weeks, students have an opportunity to present their art project to the school as a gift (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

Chemical dependency –“Breaking Through Denial” is a 6 to 10 day course facilitated by a certified Addictions Counselor III. This course utilizes guest speakers to share their experiences regarding addictions to encourage open discussion about the use, abuse, and addiction to all chemical substances, and complete the big five (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

Graduation, gifts and certification of completion occur on the last day of the nine week period. The week prior to graduation, Discovery students draw another student’s name and will be responsible for creating a gift to be given to the Discovery student on the last day of the nine weeks. Students do not purchase a gift; rather they create a gift for a fellow classmate. Gifts may include a poem, drawing, handmade card, or some other handmade gift. Graduation is performed in the in the commons area with a ceremony (Larsen & Timpson 2001).

The big five are the items that all students must achieve in order to complete the Discovery program and there are no exceptions to this rule. The big five are as follows:

1. Complete all academic assignments with at least a 70% or better.
2. Complete the autobiography with at least a 70% or better.
3. Complete the ropes course/challenge course.
4. Complete the final role play with at least a 70% or better.
5. Complete the final test with at least a 70% or better (Larsen & Timpson, 2001).

In Victory High School, teachers of the Discovery Program undergo professional development on the Program. A continuation of professional development occurs through Mr. Larsen's visits to Victory; in addition teachers complete a questionnaire /reflection sheet for each program section they teach. The questions are directly related to each activity the teacher implemented that day (Larsen & Timpson, 2001). During participation in the Discovery Program, positive support from school seems to become more significant for students over time, enhancing their resilience in several domains such as relationships, school, home, and community (Ainsenberg & Herrenkohl, 2008).

Chapter Summary

Chapter Two provided a review of the research on NCLB, alternative schools, students at risk and their needs, as well as consequences of dropping out of school, resiliency and academic success, the role of educators in developing student resiliency, and resiliency programs that motivates and teaches SEL skills. Chapter Three explores the research methodology, the design, data collection, analysis of data, and research ethics.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used for this study. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact on students' perceptions of their resiliency before and after participation in a SEL program, the Discovery Program at Victory High School. A further purpose was to investigate teachers' perceptions of student resiliency, and identify what they thought were the most effective strategies in working with students at risk. This study followed a mixed methods approach using pre- and post-program assessments and end of the program interviews with students and teachers.

Research Questions

Five research questions were formulated to guide this study.

1. (a) How do students' perceptions of their resiliency as indicated by six constructs [(i) importance of school, (ii) confidence, (iii) connections, (iv) stress, (v) well-being, and (vi) motivation] change after participating in the Discovery Program?
(b) What are the teachers' perceptions of the effect of SEL on student resiliency?
2. Are there differences in pre-program perceptions of the six resiliency constructs between students who complete the program and those who do not?
3. Are there differences in gender, race and grade level between students who complete the program and those who do not?
4. What are students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the Discovery Program?
5. What SEL strategies do teachers perceive are most effective in increasing student resiliency?

Sample

For this study, a convenience sample of students at risk enrolled in Victory High School, the alternative high school was selected. Students in the sample shared similar demographics: low-income and/or single parent family, learning or emotional disabilities, struggled academically, over-aged and under credited, poor attendance, as well as poor relationships with peers and staff. The participants were new or returning students to Victory High School referred by family, friends, peers, or other schools who participated in a nine-week, self-contained, intensive program, known as the Discovery Program, located at Victory High School in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The Discovery Program was designed to help students prepare for entrance into the full alternative program and to provide them with the skills needed to make a successful transition to the regular alternative high school (Merrell, Tom, & Larsen, 2001).

All data were collected from participating students enrolled in the Discovery Program at Victory High School during spring and summer of 2011. The sample contained students who began Discovery as their entry point into Victory's mainstream classes as well as students repeating Discovery. Eleven of these students were repeating the Discovery Program. Ninety students in three different cohorts began the Discovery Program during the spring and summer semesters of 2011; however, 45 of these individuals did not complete the program. While the researcher has also overseen the current situation of the non-completers, this study included only the 45 students who completed the Discovery Program. The average age of these students was 17 years. Sixty-four percent of the participants qualified for free or reduced lunch status. Many students qualified as at-risk according to National at-risk indicators such as behavioral issues; over-aged and under-credited; low functioning social skills; family disruptions or conflicts; and chronic absenteeism (McCall 2003).

Victory High School

Victory High School is a part of Freedom County School District 1 (FCSD1). Freedom County School District 1 has a total population of 13,349 students, the largest district in Wyoming. FCSD1 serves students from urban and rural communities. Victory High School is FCSD1's alternative high school for educating students at risk or for students that choose to attend Victory High School and possibly they were unsuccessful in the traditional setting. Victory High School works on the Quarter System, that is rather than having two semesters, the year is divided into four quarters, allowing for intense study of courses during a shorter timeframe.

Victory High School's average enrollment has been approximately 180 students per year ranging from 14 to 20 years of age. Students come to Victory through referrals from the FCSD1's traditional high schools, parents, peers, community agencies such as the community college, as well as self-referrals.

Entry to Victory High School is dependent on students and their parents attending an orientation. The orientation is the first step in gaining an understanding of the expectations of the Discovery Program, a mandatory program for students seeking entry to Victory High School. The next step involved filling out the enrollment forms and setting up an initial interview with administrative staff. Once this process is completed, the student begins the nine-week Discovery Program at the start of the next quarter.

The Discovery Program

Larsen and Timpson (2001) developed the Discovery Program to teach interpersonal skills to at-risk students entering a high school setting. The Discovery Program is a nine-week program based on teaching students how to handle themselves and their relationships, and

concentrates on developing their ability to work with others effectively and ethically.

Completion of the Discovery Program is dependent on strict adherence to attendance, following school rules, and demonstrating a commitment to respecting self and others as well as through successful completion of assessments given over the course of the program.

Students who successfully complete the Discovery Program can choose to continue in the mainstream population at Victory High School or return to their home school. However, if they do not choose to continue at Victory, their choices are very limited because Victory is based on a quarter system and all other high schools in FCSD1 are based on a semester system. For example, if students successfully complete the Discovery Program during the first or third quarter they cannot attend regular classes at a mainstream high school, as these schools are at that time mid-way through a semester. However, students may attend a credit recovery program at their mainstream high school and receive credit for a class they have previously failed. Students who attended Discovery during the second or fourth quarter have the option to return to their mainstream high school at semester and receive a regular schedule for that semester.

Instrumentation

Three instruments were used to collect data in this study, the Success Highways pre- and post-assessment (Appendix A), the Teacher Interview Protocol (Appendix B) and the Student Interview Protocol (Appendix C).

The Success Highways Assessment

The Success Highways Assessment evaluated whether students reported resilience change over the nine-weeks in the Discovery Program, a self-reporting assessment, the Success Highways Assessment (Appendix A) was administered at the start and end of the program to

determine the growth of each student involved in the Discovery Program in six constructs Importance of School, Confidence, Connections, Stress, Well-Being, and Motivation.

The Success Highways Assessment is a measure of student resiliency and has been developed and implemented for over 15 years of university studies with large heterogeneous and geographically diverse populations (Solberg, Close, & Mets, 2001). It was originally developed for college students and was revalidated for use with urban pre-college populations. Currently, the Success Highways instrument has been administered over 15,000 students from a variety of backgrounds and socioeconomic demographics around the United States. The results showed a strong correlation between high resiliency scores and academic success (Solberg & Carlstrom, 2001). The Success Highways assessment was designed to indicate how students compared to a normative group of successful students with regard to importance of education; connections to others; over-all well-being, motivation to do well in school and life; confidence in themselves; and life's stress. The premise was that when students can see there are discrepancies between their current state of mind and a desired state of behaviors students will be motivated to change (Gillis & Sidivy, 2008).

The Success Highways assessment (Appendix A) includes 108 questions measuring 6 constructs on 5 point Likert scales described in Table 3.1. The six constructs have been validated on over 15,000 students from several high schools with low to high socioeconomic status. The six inventories along with each inventory's reliability are as follows (Gillis & Sidivy, 2008).

1. The Importance of Education Inventory measures the importance of school and importance of college. There were no significant differences on the overall measure due to gender or race. The overall $r=.915$;

Table 3.1
Likert Scales for Success Highways Assessment

	1	2	3	4	5
Importance of School	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Confidence	Not At All Confident	Mostly Not Confident	Somewhat Confident	Mostly Confident	Extremely Confident
Connections	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Stress	Almost Never	Not Very Often	Somewhat Often	Very Often	Almost Always
Well-Being	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Motivation	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. The Confidence Inventory measures two distinct dimensions, social and academic confidence. This indicates a student's belief in himself or herself to multitask in high school successfully. The overall $r=.884$;
3. The Connections Inventory measures sense of support and belongingness The overall $r=.838$;
4. The Stress Inventory measures academic stress, social stress, and financial stress. This indicates the level of struggle a student encountered with work associated with high school. There were no significant gender or race differences found across a number of demographic characteristics. The overall $r=.935$.
5. The Well-Being Inventory measures agitation $r=0.86$, eating issues $r=0.83$, feeling sad $r=0.85$, and sleeping problems $r=0.86$. There were no significant gender or race differences found on the overall Well-Being Inventory. The overall $r=.941$;

6. The Motivation Inventory measures autonomous motivation or motivation where a student engages in a particular behavior out of personal choice or interest. The overall $r=.815$.

Face reliability was established by asking questions of high school teachers who read the questionnaire instrument to determine how the items on the test could be modified to be used for high school students. Based on this criterion, suggestions for re-wording and item changes were made by the team of teachers, which resulted in the current assessment with a number of items modified for ease of readability (Coleman & Hagell, 2008). After reliability levels were completed and acceptable, Gillis and Sidivy (2008), using a secondary dataset, further examined the assessment for validity evidence.

Permission to use Success Highway's assessment for this research was given by the president and vice president of the parent company ScholarCentric.

Teacher Interview

The following questions were asked in teacher interviews conducted after the Program was completed (See Appendix B): What are your perceptions of the effects of SEL on students: motivation, ability to connect with others, and sustain connections, stress levels, well-being, confidence, and belief about importance of school? What strategies of SEL do you perceive most effective in increasing student resilience?

Student Interview

The following questions were asked in student interviews conducted after the Program was completed (See Appendix C): Tell me about your Discovery experience. What are the most effective strategies you learned during Discovery? What did you enjoy while in Discovery? What did you not enjoy while in Discovery? Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Consent

In an initial orientation meeting with parents/guardians and students before the Discovery Program commenced, the researcher met with teachers, students and parents/guardians of students who were under the age of 18 and explained the purpose of this study. The following explanation regarding the study and resiliency was presented. The study's possible benefits were explained as well as any risks and how confidentiality would be maintained, how data would be stored, and how long it would take to complete the Success Highways assessment. It was also explained that completing the Success Highways assessment and the end of Program interview was voluntary. Guardians were asked to sign a written consent form (Appendix D).

In addition, prior to participating in the pre- Success Highways assessment (and in the absence of guardians), the researcher provided all students with a Student Assent form/Student Consent form 18+ years (Appendix E1, E2), and read to students the contents of the form. Students were given a clear explanation of the study, given opportunity for questions, and then students were asked to sign the form.

The four teachers of the Discovery Program were also invited to participate in the post-program audio-recorded individual interview (Appendix B – teacher interview protocol) during a time that was convenient to them; individual interviews took no more than 25 minutes. Teachers were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix F). Teachers were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw their consent at any time with no penalty. They were assured of confidentiality.

Procedure

Data were gathered using the Success Highways assessment (Appendix A) conducted at the beginning and end of the Program as a pre- and post-assessments of student resiliency. Only

students who (a) had parental permission and (b) had consented in the absence of their parents, or students who were 18 years or older and had consented to participate, took the assessment.

The Success Highways pre- and post-assessments were administered on the first day of the Discovery Program to all students who had consented to participate. The assessment took approximately 20 minutes. Students completed the assessment in their classroom. They logged on to the Success Highways' website and used their student identification number as their password. Once the students had logged on they completed the assessment. The process was repeated for the post-assessment at the end of the Program. Only the researcher had access to the information regarding each student's computer-based assessment results. Using this data collection procedure ensured that pre- and post- computer-based assessments data were collected anonymously.

Data were also gathered through semi-structured teacher and student individual interviews after the Program was completed. These interviews were conducted in a private conference room at Victory High School. With the permission of teachers and students, these interviews were audio-recorded. Teachers and students were also given the option to write their comments on a paper/pencil interview form; only one teacher chose that option. Individual student interviews were conducted after completion of the Discovery Program and took approximately five to seven minutes. Students were informed that the Success Highways assessment and student interviews were being conducted for research purposes only and had no impact on their successful completion of the Discovery Program or grades achieved.

Data Analysis

A mixed methods approach was implemented to analyze data for this study. SPSS 17.0 was utilized to analyze quantitative data collected from the Success Highways pre- and post-

assessments. Success Highways is a computerized program that allows students to answer questions regarding their perceptions on resiliency a Likert scale for six constructs: Importance of School, Confidence, Connections, Stress, Well-Being, and Motivation. The data gathered from the Success Highways were then analyzed using two tailed t-tests and a paired sample t-test.

Teacher and student interview data were transcribed and a content analysis approach was used to allocate data to pre-determined themes. Teacher interview data were arranged into themes corresponding to the six resiliency constructs. Themes for student data included: The Discovery experience, effective strategies learned, program positives, program negatives, advice for others. The students' responses were then tallied and put into table form in an effort to determine any major themes.

Research Ethics

The rights of the participants of this study were protected through the use of the Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research as enacted by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, April 18, 1979 (www.citiprogram.org). The persons involved in this project voluntarily and with adequate information entered into this project.

Role of the Researcher

I am currently a Graduation Outreach Specialist for the FCSD1. The objective for this position is to provide services, monitoring, resources for students, parents, and staff to ensure all students graduate from high school. Working with students at risk has always been a priority for me due to my own at-risk background and my determination to overcome situational poverty. I have a strong belief that resiliency can be taught and through the use of life skills nearly all

students have the ability to conquer the situation into which they have been born into and become who they are truly meant to be in life.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three explored the research methodology, the design, data collection, analysis of data, and research ethics. Chapter Four describes the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine if student resiliency changed after participating in the nine week Discovery Program, a SEL program. Quantitative data collected from the Success Highways pre- and post- assessment were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS 17.0 for Windows (2010). Qualitative findings were organized into themes corresponding to the sub-scales of the instrument and according to student interview questions.

This Chapter reports the findings with regard to the five research questions. The first part of question one addresses student pre- and post-program perceptions of the six resiliency constructs measured by the Success Highways instrument: importance of school, confidence, connectedness, stress, well-being, and motivation. After reporting student perceptions of each construct, qualitative data from post-program teacher interviews are presented to address the second part of question one. The second question explores whether differences exist in pre-program perceptions of the six resiliency construct between students who complete the Program and those who do not. The third question examines whether there are gender, race, age and grade-level differences between students who complete the Program and those who do not. The fourth question details the strategies teachers perceive most effective in increasing student resilience. The final question explores students' perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the Discovery Program.

Research Question 1a: How do students’ perceptions of their resiliency as indicated by six constructs, (i) importance of school, (ii) confidence, (iii) connections, (iv) stress, (v) well-being, and (vi) motivation, change after participating in the Discovery Program?

(i) (a) How Do Students Perceive the Importance of School at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Ten items measured the construct “Importance of School” The overall pre- and post-means for this construct were 4.10 / 4.19 on a 5-point Likert scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree(See Table 4.1). Pre-assessment means ranged from 3.82 to 4.33 and post-test means ranged from 3.83 to 4.44. After a Bonferroni adjustment, a two-tailed t-test revealed a significant increase ($p < .01$) in one individual item at the end of the Discovery Program, *Find out about college* (3.93/4.44). Means of seven of the ten items increased from the start to end of the Discovery Program. The item, *Make sure my teachers know that I want to do well in school* (4.31/3.96) indicated a significant decrease in mean at the end of the Discovery Program. A t-test indicated no significant change in students’ overall perceptions of the “Importance of School” between the start and end of the Discovery Program.

Table 4.1
Pre- and Post-Program Means for the Construct “Importance of School”

Question	Pre Mean	SD	Post Mean	SD
It is important that I...				
Finish school.	4.33	0.76	4.33	0.76
Do well in school.	4.22	0.64	4.27	0.75
Go to college.	3.82	0.88	3.83	0.88
Do well in college.	3.96	0.74	4.04	0.77
Make sure my teachers know that I want to do well in school.	4.31	0.76	3.96*	0.88
Find out about college.	3.93	0.81	4.44*	0.89
Learn how to be successful in college.	4.04	0.67	4.13	1.04
Get good grades in school.	4.07	0.81	4.22	0.92
Learn How to be successful in school.	4.18	0.65	4.27	0.89
Get a college degree.	4.04	0.80	4.29	0.90

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Strong Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree

Note: * = Significant ($p < .01$)

(i) (b) How do Discovery Program Teachers Perceive Student Attitudes towards the “Importance of School” over the Course of the Discovery Program?

Four Discovery Program Teachers were asked to share their observations of how the Discovery Program might have improved their students’ views regarding the importance of school. The following is a summary of what the teachers observed in their interviews.

Students joined the Discovery Program because they wanted to graduate. Many of them were approaching the age of 21 and therefore would no longer be allowed to attend public school. As a result, they experienced a heightened sense of urgency to stay on task and finish the program. Teachers observed that while most students knew the importance of school, they did not want to attend school and used avoidance tactics such as making comments regarding the usefulness of what they were learning, i.e., “When am I ever going to use this?” However, one teacher suggested that the positive culture of Discovery translated into some of the students’ home lives, and thus created a greater appreciation of school and increased motivation to complete assignments. By completing assignments, students found success in academics thus developing an understanding for the importance of school.

(ii) (a) How do Students Perceive their Confidence at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Twenty-two items measured the construct —“Confidence”. Means of all items increased from the start to end of the Discovery Program (Likert scale 1-5, where 1 =Not confident at all and 5 =Extremely confident). The overall pre- and post-means for this construct were 3.68/4.01 (See Table 4.2).

Table 4.2
Pre- and Post-Program Means for the Construct “Confidence”

Question	Pre	SD	Post	SD
The degree to which you feel confident in successfully...	Mean		Mean	
Making new friends at school.	3.82	0.83	4.18	0.77
Talking to teachers about homework.	3.80	0.87	4.04*	0.74
Taking good notes in class.	3.76	0.88	4.18	0.71
Writing a paper for English class.	3.51	0.87	4.02	0.81
Joining a sports activity.	3.40	1.18	3.82	1.15
Understanding what you read in your schoolbooks.	3.82	0.91	4.04*	0.77
Asking a question in class.	3.89	1.01	4.07*	0.85
Joining an after-school club.	3.69	1.10	4.07*	0.86
Correctly figuring out math problems.	2.09	0.87	2.64*	1.07
Turning in your assignments on time.	3.62	0.87	4.13	0.77
Going to class every day.	3.78	0.93	4.07	0.78
Working on a group class project.	3.67	1.00	4.07	0.80
Getting along with classmates.	1.98	1.16	2.80*	1.42
Doing well on your tests.	3.51	0.87	4.02	0.81
Using a computer to write a paper.	3.87	0.94	4.00	0.77
Using the library.	3.82	0.91	4.04	0.77
Using a computer to search the Web.	3.89	1.01	4.07	0.86
Participating in class discussions.	3.69	1.10	4.07	0.83
Keeping up to date on schoolwork.	3.84	0.62	4.29*	0.63
Preparing for a test.	3.62	0.87	4.13*	0.76
Relaxing during a test.	3.76	0.93	4.07	0.78
Studying with others for a test.	3.67	1.00	4.07*	0.81

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Not confident at all and 5=Extremely confident

* Significant ($p < .01$)

Pre-assessment item means ranged from 1.98 to 3.89 and post-test means ranged from 2.64 to 4.29. After a Bonferroni adjustment, certain individual item means showed a significant increase. The lowest means at the start of the program and at the end of the program were in *Getting along with classmates* (1.98/2.80), *Keeping up to date with school work* (2.07/2.93), and in *Correctly figuring out math problems* (2.09/2.64). Although these means showed a significant increase by the end of the program, confidence was still clearly low for these items. Significant increases in confidence related to academics were evident in: *Talking to teachers about homework* (3.77/4.27); *Understanding what they read in text books* (3.69/4.18); *Asking questions in class* (3.84/4.13), and *Preparing for tests* (2.62/4.13), and *Studying with others for tests*

(3.67/4.07). A significant increase was also seen in students' confidence in *Joining an after school club* (3.69/4.07). A t-test ($p < .01$) indicated a significant increase in "Confidence" at the end of the Discovery Program.

(ii) (b) How Do Teachers Perceive Students' Confidence at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Teachers of the Discovery Program were asked to share their observations of how the Discovery Program might have impacted their students' sense of confidence. Teachers noted that the Discovery Program gave the students tools such as communication, the ability to express their needs, and strategies for test-taking that helped them to handle many of school and life challenges. When the students felt they had the tools to respond in a positive or less confrontational manner they became more confident in themselves. As they became more confident, they were able to build positive relationships and they made good friendships at Victory. "I saw confidence increase across the board," said one teacher: "They started out with a high test anxiety for example, at the beginning of the program students came up to me and said, 'I am going to fail this.' But the way I prepared them for tests, I think that by the end of the program that was no longer happening."

(iii) (a) How Do Students Perceive their Connections at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Sixteen items measured the construct "Connections". Because of the way in which the items marked # (Table 4.3) were worded, to calculate the overall mean for "Connections," scores for these items were reversed (the score was subtracted from 5). The adjusted overall pre- and post-means for Connections were 3.56 post and 3.88 pre-assessment (Likert scale 1-5, where 1 = Not confident at all and 5 = Extremely confident). Table 4.3 reports the actual pre- and post-

assessment means which ranged from 1.87 to 4.18 and from 2.62 to 4.29 respectively. After a Bonferroni adjustment, means of certain individual items^c indicated a significant decrease in feelings of connection, in particular with family. For example: *There is no one in my family who shares my interests and concerns* (3.25/4.14); *There is no one in my family with whom I feel comfortable talking about my problems* (2.91/4.11).

Table 4.3
Pre- and Post-Program Means for the Construct “Connections”

Question	Pre Mean	SD	Post Mean	SD
The degree to which you agree with the following statements...				
There is a family member who I can talk to about important decisions in my life.	3.98	0.78	4.07	0.72
Members of my family recognize my abilities and skills	3.87	0.79	4.27	0.65
#There is no one in my family who shares my interests and concerns.	2.91	1.29	4.11*	0.78
I am very close with at least one other member of my family.	4.09	0.76	4.24	0.77
#There is no one in my family with whom I feel comfortable talking about my problems.	3.25	1.33	4.14*	0.77
I can talk about school issues or concerns with a family member.	3.82	0.78	2.96*	1.38
There are family members I can count on in an emergency.	4.16	0.74	4.31	0.70
Teachers here care about their students.	3.76	0.83	4.24*	0.65
There is a teacher here I can go see to talk to about a personal problem.	3.09	1.06	4.16*	0.64
Teachers here respect me.	3.98	0.69	4.29*	0.59
Teachers here are interested in my success.	3.91	0.90	4.00	0.68
There is a teacher here I can talk to about a personal problem.	3.60	0.96	2.80*	1.41
I have friends here at a school.	3.89	0.90	4.02	0.76
There are friends I can talk to about important decisions.	3.22	1.60	3.78	1.11
There is a friend I can depend on for help.	3.62	0.98	3.98	0.81
#I have no friends I can depend on.	1.87	1.01	2.62*	1.47

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Strong Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree

* Significant (p<.01)

Three other items also indicated significant decreases in feelings of Connections: *I can talk about school issues or concerns with a family member* (3.82/2.96); *There is a teacher here I*

can talk to about a personal problem (3.60/2.80), and I have no friends I can depend on (1.87/2.62). On the other hand, students indicated significant increases in connections through these items: *Teachers here care about their students (3.76/4.24); Teachers here respect me (3.98/4.29).* A t-test indicated no significant change in students perceptions of “Connections” at the end of the Discovery Program.

(iii) (b) How Do Teachers Perceive their Students’ Connections at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

When Discovery Program teachers were asked to share their observations on how the Discovery Program positively or negatively affected students’ connections, they responded that the Discovery Program had a strong impact on students’ abilities to connect with others and sustain those connections. Students often made friends with peers who were very different from them and therefore saw a whole new perspective, and that was invaluable to them. The Discovery Program provided a lot of intense sharing opportunities regarding students’ backgrounds, feelings, and stimulated critical thinking about interpersonal conflicts that continued throughout the program. Therefore, students had a tendency to grow very close and find new friends that they grew to trust and rely on.

(iv) (a) How Do Students Perceive their Stress at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Twenty-two items measured the construct “Stress” (See Table 4.4). The overall pre- and post-means for this construct were 2.20/2.35 (Likert scale 1-5, where 1 =Almost never and 5 = Almost always). Pre-assessment item means ranged from 1.62 to 2.78 and post-assessment means ranged from 1.91 to 2.82. Please note higher scores on this measure indicate increased levels of stress.

Table 4.4
Pre- and Post-Program Means for the Construct “Stress”

Question	Pre Mean	SD	Post Mean	SD
Degree to which you have experienced each of the following in the past month...				
Difficulty trying to fulfill responsibilities at home and at school.	2.47	1.01	2.80	1.08
Difficulty trying to meet friends.	2.42	1.08	2.82	0.96
Difficulty taking tests.	2.78	1.05	2.33	1.29
Difficulty talking with teachers about schoolwork.	2.13	0.99	2.82*	1.27
A fear of failing to meet family expectations.	2.49	1.12	2.73	1.07
Difficulty asking questions in class.	2.29	0.90	2.53	1.04
Difficulty living in the local community.	2.14	0.88	2.57	1.25
Difficulty understanding how to use the school library.	2.09	0.93	2.27	1.07
Difficulty handling relationships.	2.18	0.83	2.44	1.12
Difficulty handling your schoolwork load.	2.39	0.97	2.30	1.15
Difficulty with classmates treating you differently than they treat each other.	2.27	1.03	2.09	1.20
Difficulty writing papers for class.	2.38	0.89	2.49	1.14
Difficulty learning how to use computers.	1.62	0.68	2.27*	1.20
Difficulty paying for school supplies.	2.04	0.93	2.16	1.17
Money difficulties due to owing money to others.	1.96	1.04	2.42	1.14
Difficulty paying for food.	1.96	0.96	1.91	0.97
Difficulty paying for recreation and entertainment.	2.09	1.10	1.96	1.07
Difficulty due to your family experiencing money problems.	2.36	1.07	1.91	1.02
Difficulty getting your homework done on time.	2.09	0.87	2.18	1.08
Difficulty because of feeling a need to perform well in school.	2.13	0.92	2.31	1.00
Difficulty from teachers.	1.96	0.80	2.13	0.97
Difficulty from classmates.	1.84	0.67	2.18	1.00

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Almost never and 5=Almost always

Note: * = Significant (p<.01)

Means of all but five individual items increased slightly from the start to the end of the Discovery Program, indicating a small increase in student perceptions of stress levels. After a Bonferroni adjustment, two individual item means showed significant increases: *Difficulty talking with teachers about schoolwork* (2.13/2.82), and *Difficulty using computers* (2.29/2.53). However, as all individual items pre- and post-assessment means were below 3, and several were below 2, it may be concluded that stress was fairly low pre- and post-assessment. There was no

significant change in students' perceptions of stress from start to the end of the Discovery Program.

(iv) (b) How Do Teachers perceive their Students' Stress at the Start and End of the discovery Program?

During the interviews, Discovery teachers were asked about their perceptions of student stress. They noted that typically students in the program experienced a lot of stress in their out of school' lives. Teachers stated that the Discovery Program provided opportunities for the students to learn, recognize, and discuss causes of their anger, conflicts, and stress, which had profound effect on their ability to discuss stress and problem solve around its causes. In the same way, students learned to positively release their stress and anger while dealing with others. Teachers perceived that students' stress was caused not by program participation but rather because of what they were bringing into the classroom from their home-life. Teachers tried to decrease stress by asking students to inform them before school started if there were problems that might have an impact on their ability to learn. For example, being 5 minutes late may have been an issue, but if the teachers knew that something was bothering students then they could give the support needed. The Discovery Program gave students an opportunity to practice being really clear on what they needed.

(v) (a) How Do Students Perceive their Well-Being at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Twenty-three items measured the construct —Well-Being” (See Table 4.5). The overall pre- and post- means for this construct were 2.05 / 2.76. Pre-assessment items means ranged from 1.71 to 2.60 and post-assessment means ranged from 2.49 to 2.98 (Likert scale 1-5, where 1 = Almost Never and 5 = Almost Always).

Table 4.5
Pre and Post Program Means for the Construct “Well-Being”

Question	Pre Mean	SD	Post Mean	SD
Degree to which you have experienced each of the following in the past week. How often have you experienced ...				
Being tired but unable to sleep.	2.58	1.41	2.60	1.42
Mood swings.	2.60	1.28	2.84	1.40
Feelings of danger.	1.71	.94	2.78*	1.31
Feeling depressed.	2.02	1.18	2.71	1.44
Feelings of self-doubt.	1.98	1.11	2.67	1.41
Nightmares.	1.82	1.17	2.69*	1.38
Snacking more than usual.	2.13	1.22	2.64	1.42
Feeling hopeless.	1.80	0.87	2.87*	1.56
Sleeping less than usual at night.	2.29	1.27	2.58	1.37
Getting sick a lot.	1.96	1.07	2.98*	1.36
Overeating.	1.89	0.95	2.49	1.55
Breaking things when angry.	1.96	1.02	2.96*	1.38
Headaches.	2.24	1.17	2.73	1.59
Increased heartbeat.	1.93	1.10	2.87*	1.40
Fighting with friends.	1.71	0.84	2.87*	1.42
Feeling er ranky.”	2.16	1.33	2.87	1.50
Losing your temper.	2.18	1.21	2.67	1.49
Feeling j umpy.”	1.93	1.12	2.76*	1.37
Not sleeping well.	2.31	1.28	2.64	1.54
An upset stomach.	2.07	1.12	2.93*	1.47
Inability to sleep.	2.13	1.22	2.67	1.43
Increased appetite.	1.91	1.06	2.80*	1.46
Becoming easily upset.	1.98	1.16	2.80*	1.42

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Almost never and 5=Almost always

Note: * = Significant (p<.01)

Means for all ~~W~~ell-Being” items increased from the start to the end of the Discovery Program, indicating a decrease in well-being from start to finish of the Discovery Program. After a Bonferroni adjustment, certain individual item means indicated a significant increase: *Feelings of danger* (1.71/2.78); *Nightmares* (1.82 /2.69); *Feeling hopeless* (1.80/2.87); *Getting sick a lot* (1.96/2.98); *Breaking things when angry* (1.96/2.96); *Increased heartbeat* (1.98/2.87); *Fighting with friends* (1.71/2.87); *Feeling jumpy* (1.93/2.76); *An upset stomach* (2.07/2.93); *Increased appetite* (1.91/2.80), and *Becoming easily upset* (1.98/2.80). *Getting sick a lot* (1.96/2.98) and in

Becoming easily upset (1.98/2.80). A t-test ($p < .01$) indicated a significant decrease in students' perceptions of "Well-Being".

(v) (b) How Do Teachers Perceive their Students' Well-Being at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

During the teacher interviews teachers shared their observation of how the Discovery Program may have changed their students' views regarding their well-being. Teachers perceived that the Discovery Program was a well-rounded program that helped students become assertive individuals who knew how to get their needs met in a calm, direct manner. However, students did not adhere to personal needs such as when to go to bed, what to eat, and how to handle the turmoil at home. Many of the students did not have role models at home to guide or reinforce basic wellness guidelines. They did not have the resources at home to develop a complete sense of well-being. The decrease in students' sense of well-being may be due to increased self-awareness brought about by the program.

(vi) (a) How Do Students Perceive their Motivation at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

Fifteen items measured the construct "Motivation". The overall pre- and post-means for this construct were pre-assessment 3.30 and post-assessment 3.28 (See Table 4.6). Pre-assessment item means ranged from 2.62 to 3.80 and post-assessment means ranged from 2.33 to 3.93 (Likert scale 1-5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree). After a Bonferroni adjustment, only one item indicated a significant increase: The reason I attend school is *because if I don't I'll be punished* (2.87/3.51). This increase may stem from the fact that attendance of the Discovery Program was compulsory, and if students missed classes, they were dropped from the program.

Table 4.6
Pre and Post Program Means for the Construct "Motivation"

Question	Pre	SD	Post	SD
	Mean		Mean	
The reason I keep coming to school is...				
Because I really enjoy school.	2.93	1.05	2.33	1.23
Because, if I didn't, I'd feel guilty.	2.62	1.17	3.07	1.23
So I can make lots and lots of money.	3.33	1.09	2.93	1.27
Because education is important for the goals I have.	3.60	1.12	3.22	1.35
So important people in my life won't be disappointed in me.	3.53	1.12	3.51	1.22
Because it's fun.	3.27	1.16	3.22	1.31
Because I have to; it's required.	3.29	1.06	3.00	1.26
Because I don't want to let others down.	3.44	1.14	2.93	1.23
Because skills like reading, math, and science are important to me.	3.24	1.21	3.31	1.29
Because if I don't, I'll get punished.	2.87	1.16	3.51*	1.12
Because failing to get my diploma would bother and disappoint me.	3.80	0.94	3.93	1.05
Because there are a lot of interesting things to do.	3.40	1.10	3.67	1.02
Because I see the importance of learning.	3.56	0.86	3.69	1.04
Because, to me, education is important.	3.69	0.87	3.56	1.04
I wouldn't be here if I really had a choice about it.	3.02	1.15	3.34	1.38

Note: Likert scale 1-5 where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5= Strongly agree

Note: * = Significant (p<.01)

Six of the 15 items showed a minimal mean increase from the start to end of the Discovery Program. These were: *Because, if I didn't I'd feel guilty* (2.62/3.07); *Because skills like reading, math, and science are important to me* (3.24/3.31); *Because failing to get my diploma would bother and disappoint me* (3.40/3.67); *Because I see the importance of learning* (3.56/3.69); and *I wouldn't be here if I really had a choice about it* (3.02/3.34). On the other hand, the post mean of eight items decreased by the end of the Discovery Program. These were: *Because I really enjoy school* (2.93/2.33); *Because I can make lots and lots of money* (3.33/2.93); *Because education is important for the goals I have* (3.60/3.22); *So important people in my life won't be disappointed in me* (3.53/3.51); *Because it's fun* (3.27/3.22); *Because I have to; it's required* (3.29/3.00); *Because I don't want to let other down* (3.44/2.93), and *Because, to me, education is important* (3.69/3.56). Item means in the range of 3 for this construct indicated

motivation was average pre- and post-participation in the Discovery Program. A t-test indicated no significant change in “Motivation” between the start and the end of the Discovery Program.

(vii) (b) How Do Teachers Perceive their Students’ Motivation at the Start and End of the Discovery Program?

When the Program teachers were asked to share their observations of how the Discovery Program might have impacted their students’ motivation, they responded that motivation is a difficult concept to teach and more difficult to learn. Overall, teachers perceived if the students did not enter the Discovery Program with some motivation, the program did not help them develop it. However, the program did provide students with an urgency to want to graduate, and equipped them with tools to work through problems and conflicts while managing their behaviors. Consequently, this led to students gaining an understanding regarding their feelings and how to navigate those feelings more positively, instead of getting into trouble all the time. Managing their behaviors may lead to higher motivation academically because their grades may improve when emotions are not negating learning.

Research Question 2: Are there differences in gender, race and grade level between students who complete the program and those who do not?

The gender composition of the original 90 student participants was male 54 and female 36. Forty-five students did not complete the program. At 48.15% for males and 52.78% for females, completion rates for both genders appear similar (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7
Gender of Original Participants

	Male	Female
	Number	Number
Non-Completers	28	17
Completed	26	19

With respect to ethnicity, 48.48% of Whites, 66.67% of African-Americans, 42.75% Hispanic, 66.67% American Indian, and 100% of “Other” students completed the Program. As the overall percentages of African American, American Indian, and “Other” students were very low, it is not possible to draw conclusions as to whether race is related to program completion. It must be noted, though, that Hispanic students had the lowest completion rate (Table 4.8).

Table 4.8
Ethnicity of Participants

	Ethnicity				
	White	African American	Hispanic	American Indian	Other
Non-Completers	34	1	9	1	0
Completer	32	2	7	2	2

With respect to grade level, 65% of grade 9, 52% grade 10, 41% grade 11 and 44% grade 12 students completed the program. The highest percentages of program completers were in grades 9 and 10.

Table 4.9
Grades of Participants

	Grade Levels			
	G9	G10	G11	G12
Non-Completers	7 (35%)	13 (48%)	16 (59%)	9 (56%)
Completer	13 (65%)	14 (52%)	11 (41%)	7 (44%)

Table 4.10 demonstrates that several of the students were over-age for their grade-level.

Table 4.10
Grades and Ages of Non-Completers and Completers

Non-Completers	Grade	Ages in Years								Total	%
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20			
	9		5	1		1				7	15
	10		1	3	2	7				13	29
	11			2	9	5				16	36
	12				4	3	2			9	20
Completers	Grade	Ages in Years								Total	%
	9	3	5	4	1	1				14	31
	10		4	5	4					13	29
	11			2	2	5	1	1		11	24
	12				2	3	2			7	16

Nine of the students who did not complete the Program were in grade 10 and were aged 17 and 18 years; similarly, and of those students who did complete and were in grade 9, six were aged 16 to 18 years.

Research Question 3: What are the Differences in Pre-Assessment Means on the Six Resiliency Constructs between Students who Completed the Program and Students who did not?

The pre-assessment means for students who completed the Program were very similar to those of the non-completers in four of the six constructs. However, two constructs showed significant difference: “Well-Being” and “Importance of School”. Students who did not complete the Program indicated lower levels of “Well-Being” and viewed school as less important than students who did complete the Program (See Table 4.11).

Table 4.11
Pre-Assessment Means of Program Completers and Non-Completers

	Importance of School	Confidence	Connections	Stress	Well-Being	Motivation
Completers	4.10*	3.70	3.56	2.18	2.05*	3.30
Non-Completers	3.89	3.60	3.74	2.18	3.18	3.23

Note: * Significant (p<.01)

Research Question 4: What are Students’ Perceptions of the Discovery Program?

After completing the Program 35 students were interviewed and asked to describe their Discovery Program experiences. Students were first asked to describe their Discovery experience (See Table 4.12).

Table 4.12
Student Perceptions of the Discovery Experience

Responses	Number of Responses
Good. Fun. I like it. Best thing I’ve ever done.	13
Learned new skills.	8
It helped me a lot. I got the help I needed.	6
Made new friends.	3
Found it pointless, I did not need it, waste of time	3
It was alright, I guess.	2

Discovery students enjoyed their experience in large part because they felt it was fun, they learned new social skills and received the help when needed to complete the assigned work. Students were then asked to identify the most effective strategies they learned in the Program (See Table 4.13).

Table 4.13
Most Important Effective Strategies Learned during Discovery

Responses	Number of Responses
Anger Management	9
Problem-Solving	9
Six P's	7
-F' Messages	3
Team Work	2
I did not need to learn any strategies.	2
Modes – Adult, Child etc.	2
Assertiveness Training	1

Discovery students saw anger management and problem-solving skills as the top two strategies learned during the Discovery Program, followed by the 6 P's (Prompt, Prepared, Polite, Positive Mental Attitude [P.M.A], Participate, and Produce), and -F' messages. When students were asked what they enjoyed most about the Program, they stated they enjoyed the social aspects of the Program because they felt accepted and Discovery created a family type environment. In addition, they enjoyed learning new material (Table 4.14).

Table 4.14
What Students Enjoyed Most in the Discovery Program

Responses	Number of Responses
Social aspects, meeting new friends, acceptance from others	8
Going to school and learning.	7
Ropes Course	5
Team Work	5
Environment- Peaceful, Structure	4
Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy	1
Did not like Discovery.	1

Students identified they did not enjoy the weekly tests (See Table 4.15). Classroom disturbances and being sent home for what they perceived as minor discipline issues were other things students did not like.

Table 4.15
What Students Enjoyed Least in the Discovery Program?

Responses	Number of Responses
Tests every week	6
Classroom Disruptions	4
Being sent home for little things.	3
Five hours of sitting the same room	3
The work was boring	3
Attendance Skills	2
Closed Campus, Feeling like an inmate.	2
Music	1
Not learning regular curriculum.	1
Autobiography	1
Getting up early for school.	1
Nothing	8

When the Discovery students were given an opportunity to add any comments when interviewed, the majority of students did not have anything else to share (Table 4.16).

Table 4.16
Other Things that Students Shared

Responses	Number of Responses
No input	19
Other schools should do this, but a shorter version	4
I would recommend it to people who want to get their work done	3
It takes too much time, it could be shorter	2
Do your work and you will pass	2
It has been helpful	2
Discovery teaches you how to not be so childish	1
Liked the teacher(s)	1
Always had to raise your hand	1

Six students however believed that the program could be improved by having more than one way to get into mainstream Victory High School. These students thought that the Discovery Program was too long and it would be more effective if all students in FCSD1 could take a program like this, but while concurrently enrolled in regular classes (See Table 4.16).

Research Question 5: What were Teachers' Perceptions of the Most Effective Strategies to Increase Student Resiliency?

According to the Discovery Program teachers, effective communication, assertiveness training, anger management, and conflict resolution were the SEL strategies in which they saw most growth in their students' skills. For example, when students were not following classroom protocol they were given three redirects. If that did not take care of the issue, the student was asked to go into the hall for a quick conference/refocus with the teacher. At the beginning of the quarter during student hall conferences teachers were rarely able to complete their sentences without student interruption. However, by the end of the Program students were listening to the teachers as well as each other. Just this skill alone improved students' ability to learn the skills needed to be successful in Discovery. Once the level of trust in the communication process was established and practiced on a regular basis, a culture of mutual respect became the norm.

Developing a family type atmosphere in the classroom became important because it seemed as if most of the students needed a family. Students were accustomed to using anger to protect themselves and keep people at a distance. Therefore, anger management was a strategic skill they developed and were able to change and refocus their anger to into positive energy. Circle time provided an opportunity to be open and listen to each other's issues. Students were able to think about what they were feeling and developed empathy for each other, creating a method of refocusing their anger.

All Discovery teachers commented on the positive growth of the students and saw improvement in how the students treated their peers, teachers, and administrators. Teachers observed that students who have completed the Discovery Program have taken far more pride in being a part of Victory High School. Because of student growth and improvement in behavior the most profound change teachers saw was the increased pace in which they could implement classroom activities, assignments, and assessments without losing student understanding. Students knew that they would be held accountable for their behaviors in class, and so they took responsibility for their actions and their education.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four has analyzed the findings of the Success Highways Assessments and teacher and student interviews. It has explored the research questions guiding the study. Chapter Five discusses these findings and makes recommendations for practice and for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion of Findings, Implications, and Conclusions

For a variety of reasons, not all students are successful in traditional school settings. For students deemed at-risk of dropping out of school, research indicates that their level of resiliency is an important factor in determining whether they will graduate. Resiliency is the capacity to transform and change by developing skills that enable individuals to deal with emotions, resolve problems, make good decisions, develop positive relationships, and motivate themselves to accomplish goals (Beland, 2007). One avenue towards increasing resiliency in students may be by creating a safe, caring and respectful environment through SEL curriculum and instruction in schools (Harlacher & Merrell, 2011). The Discovery Program is a SEL curriculum designed to increase resilience in at-risk students.

Overview of the Purpose of the Study

This study sought to determine if students who participated in the Discovery Program at Victory High School increased their resiliency.

Research Questions

Five research questions were formulated to guide this study.

1.(a) How do students' perceptions of their resiliency as indicated by six constructs [(i) importance of school, (ii) confidence, (iii) connections, (iv) stress, (v) well-being, and (vi) motivation] change after participating in the Discovery Program?

(b) What are the teachers' perceptions of the effect of SEL on student resiliency?

2. Are there differences in pre-program perceptions of the six resiliency constructs between students who complete the program and those who do not?

3. Are there differences in gender, race, and grade level between students who complete the program and those who do not?
4. What are students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the Discovery Program?
5. What SEL strategies do teachers perceive are most effective in increasing student resiliency?

These five research questions informed the selection of methodology and the overall structure of the study.

Overview of the Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to explore the impact of the Discovery Program on student resiliency at Victory High School. Students attending Victory High School had previously been unsuccessful in traditional school settings and are deemed at-risk.

The sample included all students in three separate cohorts entering Victory High School in spring and summer of 2011. Initially the sample included 90 students; however, 45 students did not complete the program. Students ranged in age from 14-20 years. Permission to participate in this study was gained from all students and their parents and guardians. The four teachers who taught in the Discovery Program also agreed to participate in the study.

The instrument used to measure student resiliency at the start and end of the Discovery Program was the Success Highways assessment (Appendix A). It contained 108 items on a 5 point Likert scale measuring six resiliency related constructs: the Importance of School, Confidence, Connections, Stress, Well-Being, and Motivation. At the end of the Program, 35 students agreed to participate in a brief 3-5 minute interview (Appendix C) conducted by the researcher in which they were asked about their perceptions of the Discovery program.

Interviews (Appendix B) with the four teachers were also conducted.

Quantitative data gathered from the pre- and post- Success Highways Assessment were analyzed descriptively and inferentially and used to answer research questions 1a, 2, and 3, which explored changes in student resiliency over the timeframe of the Program and whether any differences were apparent in student perceptions of the resiliency constructs between those who completed the Program and those who did not.

Teacher's interview data were transcribed, analyzed and arranged into themes corresponding to the six resiliency constructs. These data were used to answer research questions 1b and 5 which explored teachers' perceptions of the impact of the program on student resiliency and their views on the most effective SEL strategies. Finally, student interview data were transcribed and analyzed for themes. The themes that were derived included: The Discovery experience, effective strategies learned, program positives, program negatives, advice for others. These data were used to answer questions 1a and 4.

Discussion of Findings

Five research questions were used to explore the impact of the Discovery Program on student resiliency.

Q1. Are there differences in the student resiliency constructs before and after completing the Discovery Program?

The six constructs the Success Highways Assessment measured were: Importance of school, Confidence, Connections, Stress, Well-Being, and Motivation.

Importance of School

With respect to the construct, *Importance of School*, measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, it was evident that students rated this category highly (pre-/post-test means = 4.10/4.19) before and after the Program. There was no

significant increase in students' perceptions of the importance of school over the course of the Program. One specific item indicated a significant increase: Students recognized it was important to find out about college.

Confidence

Scott and Solberg (2006) defined confidence as a belief in one's ability to do something successfully. Confidence is important because when people are confident in performing an activity, they are more likely to do well at it, try harder when it is challenging, and are less likely to avoid it.

The construct —Confidence” was measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = Not confident and where 5 = Extremely confident. The pre-assessment mean for —Confidence” was 3.69 indicating students in the study started were somewhat confident. However, by the end of the Discovery Program, students who completed the program significantly increased their confidence (4.01). Specifically, students showed significant improvement in the area of (a) social self-efficacy in *getting along with classmates*, although this mean was still low (1.98/2.93), indicating more development was required in that area, and in (b) *joining after-school clubs*. In the area of academic self-efficacy, students indicated they were significantly more confident in keeping up with schoolwork and solving math problems, studying with others and preparing for tests, talking to teachers about homework and understanding what they read in textbooks. Increased confidence may be related to the Discovery Program's focus on communication skills. The Discovery Program focuses on communication for two weeks and requires significant blocks of time to teach, practice, and provided feedback on role-play scenarios (Larson & Timpson, 2001). Teachers in this study noted that providing students with tools to successfully navigate

challenges in a positive and less confrontational manner increased their confidence in academics and in relating to others.

Connections

With respect to the construct —Connections” measured on a 5-point Likert scale students were asked the degree to which they agreed with a series of statements, where 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. There was no significant change coverall in students’ perceptions of —Connections”. The Success Highways post-assessment indicated a decrease in connectedness with family, but an increase in connectedness with teachers. Students developed relationships with teachers when they were knowledgeable, open and accepting of students’ life situations. Teachers in the study indicated that they tried to build a safe environment for students and provided direct instruction and practice on how to manage emotions and build and maintain relationships. Teachers provided a structured environment, focused on encouraging appropriate behavior, high academic expectations, and a willingness to share power with students. These strategies facilitated connectedness with students (Bondy et al., 2007). Focusing on relationships and working proactively to create respectful, welcoming communities facilitates an increased sense of connection (Hanson, 2002; McMahan, 2007).

Stress

Scott and Solberg (2006) defined two types of stress: good and bad pressure. Good pressure has a tendency to motivate individuals to get something done in time. Too much bad pressure can create an environment where individuals feel they have no control and are powerless to improve a situation. Such pressure can lead to individuals feeling tired and overwhelmed, as well as to negative health effects such as sleeplessness.

Although there was no significant change in students' stress levels over the course of the Discovery Program, means for "Stress" increased slightly from start to finish. Through student and teacher interviews, one possible explanation for the increased stress may have been due to increased student awareness of their issues. Teachers noted that student stress was mainly due to factors outside school and in their home life. For example, one student noted that while she was trying to improve her ability to problem solve and get along at home, her mother and sister continued to use degrading language to each other and to her. Teachers noted that the Discovery cohort became like a family to support each other through school and family issues.

Well-Being

Scott and Solberg (2006) defined well-being as maintaining balance among relationships, academic or work activities, and health. When individuals are out of balance in one area it can affect how well they perform in other areas. In addition, they may suffer from physical and emotional symptoms such as headaches, sleeping problems, eating problems and feeling blue or anxious. Students' feelings of "Well-Being" decreased from start to finish of the Program, but not significantly. Reasons may be that students became more aware of issues regarding their lifestyle and the effect choices they make may have on their overall well-being. Teachers noted that students paid little heed to their personal needs, such as what time to go to bed and eating a healthy diet. In addition, students did not have role models to guide them in better choices at home. Many students had been making their own wellness decisions for several years. Another observation teachers made was that families may not have the finances to supply the type of food necessary for a healthier life style. Therefore, students may have developed a better understanding for what well-being was as a result of the Discovery Program.

Motivation

Research has shown that teachers who are empathetic and demonstrate they care through various ways for example: being a good listener, setting high expectations, expecting students to act responsibly, praising student success, and encouraging students through difficult issues did facilitate growth in resiliency skills such as motivation (Waxman, 2004). The mean for “Motivation” before and after the Program was unchanged. Students started the Program feeling somewhat motivated. Only one item showed a significant increase *The reason I attend school is because if I don't I'll be punished*. School policy was that if students missed three days through absence or being sent home they were put on an attendance contract. After two more absences, students were dropped from the Program. Of concern were teacher comments that if students did not enter the Program with motivation the Program did not induce motivation. This finding may indicate that teachers require some professional development in motivational strategies for at-risk students. According to Lantieri (2001), two skills are most important for successful teaching of at-risk students: the first is the ability to connect with students who dislike teachers and the second is the ability to pull success from students who have already experienced failure (Lantieri, 2001). Empowering and motivating students does not come with a program or curricular package; rather, these characteristics are dependent on the relationships teachers build with students (Bondy, et al., 2007).

Q2 Are there differences in the 6 resiliency constructs between students who complete the program and those who do not?

There were two areas of significant difference between students that completed the Program and those who did not; these were in perceptions of the “Importance of School” and “Well-Being”. Students who did not complete the Program entered with perceptions that school

was significantly less important than those who did complete the Program. This finding indicates students who did not complete the Program may have possibly felt disengaged. In this study, the primary reasons for students dropping out of the Program were due to referrals for breaking the rules in the Discovery Program and/or lack of attendance. McCall (2003) found that students who were disengaged had more referrals to the office for various infractions. On the other hand, students who completed the Discovery Program entered with a greater appreciation for the importance of school, which may have contributed to their success in the Program.

The second construct in which significant differences occurred between students who completed the Program and those who did not was —Well-Being.” Students who did not complete the Program indicated lower levels of well-being. Screening for students who have a low sense —well-being” and implementing strategies to help improve it, may be one area Victory High School could work to develop. While Victory High School has tried to follow what most alternative schools have attempted to do, by bring dropouts back to school and supporting them until they graduate (Raywid, 2001), it has been successful only with 50% of the students who originally enrolled.

Q3.Are there differences in gender, race and grade level between students who complete the program and those who do not?

Of concern was the overall high level of non-completion of the Program (50%). Although, more males than females entered the Program, the completion rate was similar for both genders (48% for males and 52% for females). The majority of Program entrants were white (73%); 17% were Hispanic; 4% were African American; 4% were American Indian, and 2% were Other. Completion rates were similar for all Ethnicity groups. With respect to grade level, 65% of grade 9, 51.85% grade 10, 40.74% grade 11, and 43.75% grade 12 students completed

the program. The highest percentages of program completers were in grades 9 and 10 and the highest percent of non-completers were in 10 grade and grade 11. It would appear that the less advance in age students are, the more likely they are to complete the Program.

Q4 What are students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the Discovery Program?

Overall the students' perceptions were positive regarding their experiences in the Program. The 50% that completed the Program thought that their experience was fun, and helpful academically as well as emotionally and socially. The main skills students highlighted were anger management and problem solving. However, a very small number of students did state that they thought the Program was pointless and a waste of time.

Q5 What SEL strategies do teachers perceive are most effective in increasing student resilience?

According to the Discovery Program teachers, effective communication, relationship building, assertiveness training, anger management, and conflict resolution were the SEL strategies that contributed to growth in their students' skills. Anger management was a key to students' success inside and outside the classroom. Most students used anger as a defense mechanism and a way to keep people at a distance. Teachers endeavored to build trust and create a family type atmosphere in the classroom and thus to develop norms for mutual respect. Once the level of trust in the communication process was established and practiced on a regular basis, a culture of mutual respect became the norm. Alternative schools rely on forming small communities for students, creating conditions where they feel empowered and teaching a curriculum that goes beyond academics and really supports students' needs (Zin, et al., 2004). Circle time provided the opportunity for students to explore their feelings and develop empathy for each other. Teachers noted positive growth in students' interactions with each other, with

teachers, and with administrators. Moreover, they noted that Program graduates took great pride in being part of Victory High School.

Implications for Practice

Currently, all students who enroll in Victory High School must attend and pass the Discovery Program. The staff has stated they saw the culture improve at Victory High School since the Discovery Program has become mandatory: Students that completed the Discovery Program are more respectful and easier to teach. However, the dropout rate is high and it appears the Program does not meet the needs of 50% of the students who enroll. Therefore, if the only alternative high school programming available in FCSD1 has a 50% completion rate, improvements must be made to the existing programs or develop another method for increasing graduation rate district-wide for students at risk must be implemented.

Implication for Policy

Currently, the only method for student entry into Victory High School is at the beginning of each quarter, by attending a Discovery Program orientation and an interview. Students who participated in this study stated that they thought that the Discovery Program had value, but several students felt the program timeframe should be curtailed. Students suggested that a streamlined approach might be more acceptable for those students who did not have behavior problems or had been in another program that had taught them the same type of skills. An implication for policy change might be to use the Success Highways assessment or a similar measure of resiliency to pre-assess every student interested in attending Victory High School, and to review behavior logs for patterns, and assess transcripts for educational needs and/or credits prior to Program commencement. This information would provide data for a program track or a combination of tracks for students with behavioral issues, students with academic

issues, and students with credit issues. Through an interview with students and guardians and information from their previous school a specific plan could be developed for each student.

Implications for Practices in at-risk Programs and Alternative Schools

Alternative schools and programs for at-risk students have been in place for many years (Raywid, 2001). To cater to the needs of this student population, schools should be aware of specific needs these students have. Resiliency can affect school and life outcomes for students (Zin, et al., 2004). Austin (2002) defined resiliency as comprising two factors-external and internal assets. External assets are support systems in students' home life. Internal asset include empathy, self-efficacy, and problem-solving. To develop effective individualized programming schools need first assess students' resiliency. The following protocol might be useful in finding out more about at-risk students and thus help to increase Program completion and ultimately graduation rates.

1. Before starting a program students will take the Success Highways pre-assessment.
2. Staff will analyze the Success Highways pre-assessment data and screen for students' resiliency levels and social, emotional needs.
3. Program administrators will develop an interview to assess students' needs. Questions may include:
 - a. Why do you want to attend this school?
 - b. Why have you not been successful in school?
 - c. What do you need to be successful?
 - d. What are you willing to do to be successful?
 - e. Are you a parent?
 - f. Do you live at home?

4. Program administrators will review each student's academic record for:
 - a. Number of credits
 - b. Behavior issues
 - c. Prior testing for learning disabilities
5. Each student will be assigned a case manager who will use the above information to develop a social, emotional, and academic plan and review it with the student, guardian, and the teacher(s).

Implications for Practice for Teachers of At-risk Students.

According to Gleason and Dynarski (2002), at-risk students are discouraged learners who for whatever reasons do not achieve in standard high schools. They usually exhibit poor attendance, habitual truancy, and academic failure, making motivating them to be successful a challenge, as teachers in this study noted. Teachers need specific skills to connect with reluctant learners (McCall, 2003). In addition, most teachers are not equipped to handle crises (Newkirk & Rutstein, 2000). Successful teachers of at-risk students require two competencies – to connect with students who dislike teachers and ability to pull success from students who have experienced failure (Lantieri, 2001). Empowering students is not intrinsic to programs but rather resides in teachers building deeper relationships with students (Bondy, et al., 2007). Working with at-risk students is difficult and stressful and not all teachers have the skills. Therefore most teachers need professional development. For teachers to be more successful working with at-risk students administrators should:

1. Develop teacher resiliency through professional development/support program.
2. Implement continual professional development for all teachers and counselors at Victory High School.

Implications for Future Research

Research indicates that young people who do not complete high school are less successful in future than those that do (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006; Muennig, 2005; Raphael, 2004; Rouse, 2005). Graduates have more career opportunities, earn higher wages, live longer, and enjoy a more secure and comfortable life, and raise children who are more likely to be successful (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). It is in society's best interest that all students graduate from high school. In addition, because of the mandates of NCLB (2001), districts are under great pressure to increase graduation rates. Therefore programs that reduce student dropout are very important. The Discovery Program at Victory High School is only in its second year, and so to date there are insufficient data to ascertain the degree to which it is successful in guiding at-risk students to graduate. What is perturbing, however, is the fact that only 50% of students beginning the Discovery Program actually completed it. It becomes important to explore the reasons behind this high program dropout rate and the extent to which initial levels of resiliency impact the likelihood of students completing the program. Lube & Eloff (2004) identified an increased need to measure students' actual social, emotional, and resiliency competencies before and after implementation of the SEL curriculum. Therefore, longitudinal data should be collected in the following areas.

1. Demographic data (age, grade level, gender, ethnicity, credits achieved, SES) on all students who enroll in at-risk programs.
2. Numerical data on the percentage of students enrolling in at-risk programs who graduate.
3. Qualitative data for reasons completion and non-completion of at-risk programs.

Interviews with non-completers may offer insights into dynamics that only non-

completers are able to share possibly resulting in Program changes to improve the dropout situation.

4. Research successful alternative high schools.

Limitations

This was a small study of one Program in one alternative high school at one moment in time. As such findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of at-risk students. However, it is hoped that lessons learned in this study may be useful to FSCD1 district and school administrators in discussions of ways to increase graduation rates among at-risk students.

Conclusion

This study explored levels of resiliency in students enrolled in the Discovery Program, a SEL Program for at-risk students at Victory High School in FCSD1 located in a city in a western state. Students who completed the program significantly increased their confidence and their perception of the importance of school. While it was successful for 50% of the students who initially enrolled for the other 50% it was not. Data indicated that students who did not complete the Program saw school as less important and had lower levels of “Well-Being” than students who completed. It may behoove program administrators to assess student resiliency on entry to the Program and develop individual plans to meet all students’ needs.

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APPENDIX A
SUCCESS HIGHWAYS ASSESSMENT

Do not mark on the questionnaire.
REVVING UP
INSTRUCTIONS

- This is a voluntary questionnaire which is part of *Success Highways*.
- If you come across any items that you do not wish to answer you are free to skip them.
- There is no time limit to this questionnaire, and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Please do not write on the questionnaire. Use the answer sheet to record all of your answers.
- Use a #2 pencil to mark your answers on the answer sheet.
- Fill ovals completely with heavy marks, and erase clearly.

PROVIDING YOUR INFORMATION

- Please write your school name in the appropriate blanks.
- Your school professional will now provide you with instructions on how to fill out your School ID Number.
- Please also include your Race/Ethnicity and Gender.

YOU ARE NOW READY TO BEGIN!

IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL

This section asks about your beliefs about the importance of school and college. Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral/undecided
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

Please Answer All Items

Using the scale above, please mark the number on the answer sheet that best shows

the degree to which you agree with each statement below:

It is important that I . . .

1. Finish school.
2. Do well in school.
3. Go to college.
4. Do well in college.
5. Make sure my teachers know that I want to do well in school.
6. Find out about colleges.
7. Learn how to be successful in college.
8. Get good grades in school.
9. Learn how to be successful in school.
10. Get a college degree.

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if you strongly agree with the statement . . .

It is important that I . . .

Get along with other students.
5

CONFIDENCE

This section asks for information about the **degree of confidence you have in completing a variety of activities associated with being a student at your school.**

Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

- 1 = Not confident at all
- 2 = Mostly not confident
- 3 = Somewhat confident
- 4 = Mostly confident
- 5 = Extremely confident

Please Answer All Items. Using the scale above, please mark the number on the answer sheet that best shows

the degree to which you feel confident in successfully . . .

11. Making new friends at school.
12. Talking to teachers about homework.
13. Taking good notes in class.
14. Writing a paper for English class.
15. Joining a sports activity.
16. Understanding what you read in your schoolbooks.
17. Asking a question in class.
18. Joining an after-school club.
19. Correctly figuring out math problems.
20. Turning in your assignments on time.
21. Going to class every day.
22. Working on a group class project.
23. Getting along with classmates.
24. Doing well on your tests.
25. Using a computer to write a paper.
26. Using the library.
27. Using a computer to search the Web.
28. Participating in class discussions.
29. Keeping up to date on schoolwork.
30. Preparing for a test.
31. Relaxing during a test.
32. Studying with others for a test.

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if you are *extremely confident* in successfully .
Finding the school library.5

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if you *agree* with the statement:
I can trust my family to support me.

CONNECTIONS

This section asks about **your relationships with family, teachers, and friends.**

Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral/undecided
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

Please Answer All Items

Please indicate, by marking the number on the answer sheet that best represents **the degree to which you agree with the following statements:**

- 33. There is a family member who I can talk to about important decisions in my life.
- 34. Members of my family recognize my abilities and skills.
- 35. There is no one in my family who shares my interests and concerns.
- 36. I am very close with at least one other member of my family.
- 37. There is no one in my family with whom I feel comfortable talking about my problems.
- 38. I can talk about school issues or concerns with a family member.
- 39. There are family members I can count on in an emergency.
- 40. Teachers here care about their students.
- 41. There is a teacher here I can go see to talk about academic problems.
- 42. Teachers here respect me.
- 43. Teachers here are interested in my success.
- 44. There is a teacher here I can talk to about a personal problem.
- 45. I have friends here at school.
- 46. There are friends I can talk to about important decisions.
- 47. There is a friend I can depend on for help.
- 48. I have no friends I can depend on.

STRESS

This section asks you about **the stresses in your life**.

Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Not very often
- 3 = Somewhat often
- 4 = Very often
- 5 = Almost always

Please Answer All Items

Please indicate the degree to which you have **experienced each of the following in the PAST MONTH:**

- 49. Difficulty trying to fulfill responsibilities at home and at school.
- 50. Difficulty trying to meet friends.
- 51. Difficulty taking tests.
- 52. Difficulty talking with teachers about schoolwork.
- 53. A fear of failing to meet family expectations.
- 54. Difficulty asking questions in class.
- 55. Difficulty living in the local community.
- 60. Difficulty understanding how to use the school library.
- 57. Difficulty handling relationships.
- 58. Difficulty handling your schoolwork load.
- 59. Difficulty with classmates treating you differently than they treat each other.
- 60. Difficulty writing papers for class.
- 61. Difficulty learning how to use computers.
- 62. Difficulty paying for school supplies.
- 63. Money difficulties due to owing money to others.
- 64. Difficulty paying for food.
- 65. Difficulty paying for recreation and entertainment.
- 66. Difficulty due to your family experiencing money problems.
- 67. Difficulty getting your homework done on time.
- 68. Difficulty because of feeling a need to perform well in school.
- 69. Difficulty from teachers.
- 70. Difficulty from classmates.

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if you **not very often** experience:

Difficulty playing sports.

2

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if during the last week you **somewhat often** experienced . . . Feelings of joy.

WELL-BEING

This section asks you about how often you have had any of these **health-related experiences** during the past week.

Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

- 1 = Almost never
- 2 = Not very often
- 3 = Somewhat often
- 4 = Very often
- 5 = Almost always

Please Answer All Items

Please indicate **the degree to which you have experienced each of these during the PAST WEEK:**

How often have you experienced . . .

- 71. Being tired but unable to sleep.
- 72. Mood swings.
- 73. Feelings of danger.
- 74. Feeling depressed.
- 75. Feelings of self-doubt.
- 76. Nightmares.
- 77. Snacking more than usual.
- 78. Feeling hopeless.
- 79. Sleeping less than usual at night.
- 80. Getting sick a lot.
- 81. Overeating.
- 82. Breaking things when angry.
- 83. Headaches.
- 84. Increased heartbeat.
- 85. Fighting with friends.
- 86. Feeling ~~e~~ranky.”
- 87. Losing your temper.
- 88. Feeling ~~j~~umpy.”
- 89. Not sleeping well.
- 90. An upset stomach.
- 91. Inability to sleep.
- 92. Increased appetite.
- 93. Becoming easily upset.

MOTIVATION

This section asks about **your reasons for going to school**. Different people have different reasons for going to school; we just want to know how much you agree or disagree with each reason given below.

Mark the number on the answer sheet that best represents your present attitude or opinion. Remember, this is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

The range of answers is:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Unsure/undecided

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

Please Answer All Items

The reason I keep coming to school is . . .

94. Because I really enjoy school.

95. Because, if I didn't, I'd feel guilty.

96. So I can make lots and lots of money.

97. Because education is important for the goals I have.

98. So important people in my life won't be disappointed in me.

99. Because it's fun.

100. Because I have to; it's required.

101. Because I don't want to let others down.

102. Because skills like reading, math, and science are important to me.

103. Because if I don't, I'll get punished.

104. Because failing to get my diploma would bother and disappoint me.

105. Because there are **a lot** of interesting things to do.

106. Because I see the **importance** of learning.

107. Because, to me, education is important.

108. I wouldn't be here if I really had a choice about it.

EXAMPLE:

You would mark the number on the answer sheet if you ***strongly disagree*** that the reason you come to school is . . .

Because I like the school lunches.

APPENDIX B
TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Teacher Interview Protocol

1. What are your perceptions of the effect of SEL on students?
 - a) belief about importance of school?
 - b) confidence?
 - c) ability to connect with others, and sustain connections?
 - d) stress levels?
 - e) well-being?
 - f) motivation?
2. What strategies of SEL do you perceive most effective in increasing student resilience?
3. What would you like to do if you could change things next time you teach Discovery?
4. Is there any component of this program that you considered ineffective?
5. What else would you like to say about Discovery?

APPENDIX C
STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your Discovery experience.
2. What are the most effective strategies you learned during Discovery?
3. What did you enjoy while in Discovery?
4. What did you not enjoy while in Discovery?
5. Is there anything that else you'd like to share?

APPENDIX D

STUDENT INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM

APPENDIX F

TEACHER INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM

