STUDENT RESILIENCY AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

A thesis presented

by

Susan Kustka-McLaughlin

to

The School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2017
Abstract

Many research studies have been completed that attempt to understand motivation and whether or not motivation is a key to success. However, there seems to be less information on how to tap and increase motivation for those who may be less motivated to succeed. Given the high unemployment rates in the United States today, intrinsic motivation is an essential ingredient for achievement of college and career success, as those less motivated will not typically be the ones to both graduate and become competitive in the job market. Understanding what it is that motivates individuals at early ages and maximizing these critical components in the educational environment is critical to the future college and career success of today’s students.

Additionally, students who have suffered from much adversity in their early years seem to need to be able to develop resilience, in order to persevere and develop coping skills to succeed in later life. There is a lot of research related to resilience, but not as much that is tied directly to academic success. This qualitative narrative study was completed in order to better understand what makes students more resilient in the face of adversity and motivated to achieve academic success, as well as to determine what educators can do to help develop resilience and motivate students to achieve college and career success.

Keywords: resilience, motivation, adversity, grit, perseverance, academic success, college and career success
Acknowledgements

I would like to take a moment to thank the eight students discussed in this narrative study for being brave enough to share their personal stories of resilience and motivation for college and career success, despite having experienced much adversity in their young lives. These private, real-life stories of the various trauma they had suffered from must have been difficult to talk about and this may have brought to the forefront bad memories that they would rather not think about. Yet, they shared these stories with a stranger such as myself, having appreciated the value of my research.

So, too, do I wish to acknowledge my parents for helping me to develop the resilience I needed to become the successful educator, administrator, and scholar practitioner that I am today. My experiences in my early years have helped to shape and mold me into a hardworking individual who has never given up, even when my path became challenging in my young adult years. While my father has long passed and my mother is at the end stages of Alzheimer’s, I know they would be proud of my accomplishments. My life with my parents, coupled with the inspiration of my eighth grade science teacher who made me believe in myself, have helped to make me the person I am today.

Finally, I would particularly like to thank my advisor, Dr. Christopher Unger, who supported me in this last stage of my doctoral journey, as well as my husband, Jim, who supported me throughout this entire three-year journey, even when it meant I was often too busy and too distracted to stop to smell the roses at times.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” Robert Frost
# Contents

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION
- Statement of the Research Topic ................................................. 6
- Positionality Statement ............................................................. 15
- Significance of the Study .......................................................... 20
- Research Questions ................................................................. 21
- Theoretical Framework ............................................................. 22
- Conclusion .................................................................................. 26

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW
- Introduction .................................................................................. 28
- Motivation and Academic Success .............................................. 29
- Resilience and Academic Success .............................................. 37
- Summary ...................................................................................... 43

## CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN
- Research Design ......................................................................... 45
- Research Tradition ..................................................................... 49
- Ethical Considerations ............................................................... 50
- Feasibility of Study .................................................................... 51
- Site and Participants ................................................................... 52
- Recruitment and Access ............................................................. 54
- Data Collection ........................................................................... 56
- Data Storage ............................................................................... 58
- Data Analysis ............................................................................. 58
- Trustworthiness ......................................................................... 61
- Presentation of Findings ............................................................. 62
- Protection of Human Subjects ..................................................... 62

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS
- Context ......................................................................................... 64
- Gail .............................................................................................. 66
- Arlene .......................................................................................... 70
- Melissa .......................................................................................... 74
- Denise ........................................................................................... 78
- Kathy ............................................................................................. 82
- Carmel ............................................................................................ 85
- Chaz ............................................................................................... 90
- Chrissy ........................................................................................... 93
- Themes from Across the Interviewees in Relationship to the Research Questions .................................................. 97
- Summary ...................................................................................... 111

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
- Revisiting the Problem ............................................................... 113
- Discussion of Major Findings ..................................................... 114
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications and Recommendations</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Studies</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Reflection</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Interview Protocol Form</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Research Topic

Intrinsic motivation refers to behavior that is driven by internal benefits and allows a person to focus on a task even when it is uninteresting (Burton et al., 2006). Intrinsically motivated people get pleasure from a task or the sense of satisfaction that comes from completing a task, without the need for external rewards (Rowell, 2013). This type of motivation can help high school students to become academically successful and lead to successful college and career outcomes as well.

Many research studies have been completed in an attempt to understand intrinsic motivation and whether or not motivation is a key to academic success (Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro, & Koestner, 2006; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Rowell, 2013; Walker, Greene, B. & Mansell, 2006; Wiest, Wong, Ceravntes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). These studies and many others indicate that there is indeed a connection between intrinsic motivation and academic success. However, there seems to be less information on exactly what it is that will increase intrinsic motivation for academic success of individual students, particularly when they do not have environments that promote academic success. This researcher decided to focus her research on students who have demonstrated motivation, despite adverse circumstances in their environment, in the hope to determine what it is that has helped these students to become motivated to succeed.

There is reason to be concerned about the need for students to be motivated to have successful college and career outcomes. While the United States unemployment rate has decreased from about 10% in 2010 to about 5% in 2016, students still need to be competitive in order to attain a successful career after exiting school (Labor, 2016). In speaking with leaders
from higher education, a common concern they have noted is that many of today’s students are not presenting to college and/or the workforce with the necessary motivation to succeed in the competitive, global society they are entering. It might seem that, given the rate of unemployment that still exists in the United States today, intrinsic motivation is an essential ingredient for achievement of college and career success. This researcher believes that those who are not intrinsically motivated will not be as likely to graduate and/or be competitive in the job market and meet with success.

Similarly to studies on motivation, additional studies have been completed in order to understand how resilience of students relates to academic success (Aldwin, Cunningham, & Taylor, 2010; Andrews, McCabe, & Wideman-Johnston, 2014; Morrison & Allen, 2007; Richardson, 2002; Prince-Embury, 2008). The ability to succeed and overcome adversity comes from resilience, which can be fostered by supportive adults, such as teachers (Harvey, 2007). Resilience has been described as the ability to overcome adversity and be successful, even after being exposed to high risk, as well as described as the ability to sustain competence under pressure and the capacity to recover from trauma (Greene, Galambos & Lee, 2004). Sometimes students are presented with a great deal of childhood adversity or trauma in their environments, and these children may need to have better coping skills/enhanced resiliency to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of college or career success (Richardson, 2002). Emmy Werner, who studied resilience of high risk children, describes various types of adversity such as poverty, parental bereavement, adverse family environments stemming from mental illness, schizophrenia, alcohol and drug-abusing parents, or perinatal stress (Aldwin, Cunningham & Taylor, 2010). This resiliency that students need to develop may also be described as grit—"the
tenacious pursuit of a dominant superordinate goal despite setbacks” (Duckworth & Gross, 2014, p.319).

Without motivation and the ability to be resilient when faced with adversity, I believe that many individual students may not able to reach their full potential in life. Learning what some students believe has led them to become motivated and develop resilience may help educators become more adept at helping students develop to their full potential, since only about 1/3 of high risk students have been found to develop into caring, confident, and competent adults, under normal circumstances. In the current predominately middle class community that was the focus of this research study, a number of families exist with diverse circumstances. There are families who may not have been formally educated, others who are homeless, and some are socioeconomically challenged and/or English Language Learners with diverse cultural backgrounds. These diverse circumstances can lead educators to believe that the families may be complacent and/ or unsupportive of promoting higher education as an opportunity for career advancement for their children within the school system. Having spoken with many students and parents, it seems that, for some, getting a job after high school may be the goal or expectation that is set by the family, rather than the pursuit of a career that interests the student and maximizes the individual strengths of that student. Some less-educated parents and some with cultural or language barriers may not be aware of the realm of possibilities that are available for their children, and doors could close unnecessarily without this family support. Students may not have a home environment promoting academic success, but educators and school counselors can help parents learn how to support their children, in order to help them develop resilience and become more motivated as an individual learner (Griffin & Galassi, 2010).
Educators often struggle to motivate students when the family priorities do not appear to be the same as in the school setting. Added to this problem, some students do not often have the resilience necessary to overcome obstacles and persevere when they are struggling to succeed in academic settings. Increasing student motivation and resilience can help students overcome adversity and lead to more successful academic outcomes (Harvey, 2007). There seems to be an inherent need to create an enhanced educational environment that promotes high expectations for students, engages parents to support the educational environment at home, and that has an expectation that students have resilience and are intrinsically motivated to succeed. If the home environments do not innately provide that supportive learning environment and the high bar that is needed to enhance student achievement and career opportunities, schools may need to fill the gap (Dietrich, Kracke, & Nurmi, 2011). Educational institutions need to be able to determine what motivates students and how to encourage students to be self-motivated to succeed in today’s world, as society cannot always assume the support and motivation is being provided in the home environment (Dahl & Smimou, 2011). Many of today’s students also have not learned the coping skills needed to persevere when school becomes more challenging. The school environment can be a place where students are taught strategies to enhance the resilience needed to succeed when met with a challenge (Morrison & Allen, 2007).

The school district I work in boasts a high school with a well-developed Career Technical Educational program within the regular high school setting, but, for some, there is little consideration that a vocational program need not solely be expected to lead to the last stop on a child’s career path. The skills students can learn in hands-on certificate programs can also help them become more resilient to succeed in college or career opportunities. Educators in vocational programs can also help develop resilience of students and help them become
motivated to succeed in higher education, even if the family does not have that aspiration for the student. This working class community may want to embrace the use of vocational programs and other academic offerings as potential stepping-stones to the possibility of higher education and broader career opportunities for the student body at large to lead to a higher graduation rate of students continuing on to college.

Having completed almost twenty-three years working in the field of public education, this researcher continues to notice the inequitable learning experiences that some students are presented with, from school district to school district, but also from classroom to classroom, within the same school or district programs. Additionally, students present with diverse learning styles, special needs, varying socioeconomic statuses, and cultural diversity, all of which can impact the individual learning experience. These differences that students present with in the educational setting can hinder student learning and acquisition of skills, if the teaching style is not altered to meet the learning needs of all students within the classroom environment. The increasing needs students present to class with will need to be identified and targeted with strategic interventions, in order to ensure that all students fulfill their potential for college and career success.

Not all students have environments that promote high expectations for academic success. This creates a need for the public school setting to ensure that students are aware of their own individual interests and future opportunities, in order to fill some of the environmental gaps that may be present. Parent involvement is shown to have a positive affect on student academic outcomes, yet schools cannot control the environment that students come from to ensure that parental involvement occurs, which leads to a need for school settings to fill these gaps for students when they are present (Griffin, & Galassi, 2010). Knowing that the environment can
impact student success but also being aware that teachers cannot change the home environment has led me to the problem of practice. Therefore, the problem of practice in this research study is to determine what college-going, academically successful students growing up in challenging, unsupportive family and/or cultural contexts attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically. The narrative study may help educators better understand what supports they can put in place to promote academic success of their students.

**Justification for research.** As referenced above, there is much research and evidence to support the belief that intrinsic motivation and resilience are keys to success (Pintrich, 2002; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Not having resilience and/or intrinsic motivation may pose problems related to future college and career success of individuals. Children that are intrinsically motivated are less likely to give up when tasks become challenging and are more cognitively engaged in the learning process (Walker et al., 2006). By understanding the relationship of intrinsic motivation and teacher support, educators may be able to expand the way they instruct students in order to implement a better educational system for students to succeed in (Dahl, & Smimou, 2011). Teachers can influence students’ intrinsic motivation by using techniques that are intellectually stimulating (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Griffin, 2011). Although intrinsic motivation doesn’t automatically lead to success, students who are motivated tend to overcome setbacks and return to class or return to their textbooks even after failure (Burton, et al., 2006). Those who are more motivated tend to be more competitive academically and in the career market as well, as they stay focused on the pursuit of future goals.

People who are intrinsically motivated seem to set and achieve goals that are personally fulfilling and also achieve at higher levels of success, as demonstrated in the research by McMillan and Reed (1994), in a study of at-risk students. Students who are intrinsically
motivated tend to pursue tasks for pleasure and, when encouraged to be intrinsically motivated in younger years, they tend to be more motivated for academic success in later years as well (Wiest, et al., 2001). Intrinsically motivated individuals are typically able to self-regulate better than students who are less motivated in the attainment of goals and overcoming of setbacks, as the sense of well-being is not impacted as negatively when one is motivated to succeed, which increases the likelihood of a successful career (Burton, et al., 2006). As evidenced in one study by Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck (2010) it is indicated that the amount students read can be strongly predicted by intrinsic reading motivation, which would likely increase academic achievement in reading. This intrinsic reading motivation, however, is partly determined by early reading literacy success (Becker, et al. 2010). Students may be more motivated to read when they are able to achieve reading literacy in the early years, indicating a strong need to increase reading instruction in these years, to begin to develop more intrinsic motivation towards reading. Early reading acquisition and motivation should lead to more academic success overall, since motivated learners tend to be goal-oriented and motivated to achieve at higher levels, such as in higher education (Lee, McInerney, Liem, & Ortiga, 2010). Other studies also show a close relationship between intrinsic motivation and future goals leading to academic success (Burton et al., 2006; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002;).

A number of studies, including those by Garn & Jolly (2014), Linnenbrink & Paul (2002), and Harackiewicz & Elliot (1993) demonstrate that intrinsic motivation supports the acquisition of knowledge and skills in academic settings. An increased use of learning strategies in mathematics classrooms has been attributable to intrinsically motivated students vs. their counterparts, which would indicate that motivated students will likely be more successful as they are more inclined to use strategies which will lead to success (Berger, & Karabenick, 2011). One
study by Bolkan et al. (2011) indicates that when teachers are able to positively influence intrinsic motivation of students, these students approach studying of material in a deeper, less surface-level manner, which also tends to lead to greater academic success. All of the studies noted above seem to support the connection of intrinsic motivation to deeper studying and enhanced use of strategies to support instruction that indicates how motivation may lead to academic success.

Building resiliency of students to help them maintain motivational levels and overcome adversity is also important to overall academic success. Morrison and Allen (2007) point out the importance of the environment in promoting resiliency, most specifically teacher behaviors and supports. Resiliency can be promoted and supported by school psychologists for all students, including those whom have suffered adversity in their lives (Prince-Embury, 2008). Educators do not receive training on developing resiliency as part of their college training, yet students often depend on educator support to help build resiliency to improve academic outcomes.

Based upon the various research reviewed related to intrinsic motivation and resiliency and their connections to academic success, one may conclude that having intrinsic motivation and being resilient have a positive impact upon and are more likely to lead to both academic and college and career success. Therefore, given the demographics in the school district that was studied and the need to improve successful outcomes for students and educators there seems to be a need to ensure that students are both resilient and intrinsically motivated, in order for them to set higher-level goals and to be successful in future college and career opportunities.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** There is much research to support that intrinsic motivation is key to academic success. Burton, et al. (2006) indicate that students who are motivated to succeed tend to persevere and stay focused on meeting academic goals even when faced with
setbacks, but they do not provide concrete examples of how to motivate these students. While other research points out numerous ways to motivate students, there is conflicting data as to what is more successful in motivating students. Harackiewicz and Elliot (1993) point out that setting achievement goals can be motivating for student success, while Simmons and Page (2010) indicate that allowing choice in the classroom and moving from teacher control can empower and motivate students to succeed as well. Individual student pride in work can also tend to motivate (Bowman, 2011) and teacher praise, when sincere, has also shown to positively impact intrinsic motivation (Henderlong, & Lepper, 2002). Although much research supports that teachers can motivate students, there are few concrete strategies that can be used regularly in the classroom setting to insure successful outcomes. Reading individual success stories from students who have been motivated to succeed and what helped to motivate them may provide concrete ideas that educators can apply in classroom settings, in order to help students develop intrinsic motivation for future college and career success.

There is also a significant amount of research to support that developing resilience will help students persevere in the presence of obstacles or adversity. Studies show that 25% of students are resilient, even though they may have had many risk factors in their environments, and they are able to persevere despite the adversity (Richardson, 2002). Research also shows that when teachers provide social-emotional development in the classroom, along with opportunities for students to discuss strengths and talents with others in the classroom, this, in turn, can increase resiliency, but what should this social-emotional development look like? (Morrison & Allen, 2007). Research does not provide the scripts for teachers to follow. Should this become part of the taught curriculum? How will teachers fit this into the school day?
Resiliency development can take place in the classroom environment, but what works best for individual students?

Teachers and parents need concrete, proven ways to help students become motivated for success and to help them to increase resilience, in order to continue to succeed when faced with adversity that can impact their overall success. It is through the narrative study and learning about what, in the students ‘environments, in particular, helped individual students to become intrinsically motivated for academic success and develop resiliency to persevere when faced with obstacles or adversity in their home environments. These types of personal stories are lacking in much of the current research on motivation and resilience and may provide insight into what will work to help students achieve college and career success.

**Audience.** This study will be useful as a tool for educators and school leaders in K-12 school communities. The school district in which the research takes place is comprised of many working class families from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and it may help to educate the community on the importance of supporting the school economically, in order to finance successful programs, and in the promotion of high expectations for all students. This study will also resonate with and act as a resource to communities with similar demographics, in their struggles to promote high expectations and academic outcomes for students. Learning what motivates students and increases resilience for students to have successful outcomes can be of interest to educators who are interested in supporting individual student growth.

**Positionality Statement**

Educators are often challenged with trying to motivate and encourage students to set high bars for college and career opportunities, when the environment and/or intrinsic motivation levels do not support this level of commitment. For example, there is a correlation between
parental involvement and student motivation in high school, but not all students have this level of involvement from the home environment (Gonzalez, 2002). Understanding what it is that motivates individuals at early ages can be beneficial to educators and leaders who strive to develop students who can achieve college and career success.

As a white, female, educated professional in a high-level leadership role as an Assistant Superintendent of Schools, my position alone might indicate the biases I have in relationship to the working class environment in which I currently work and hope to enhance. Having grown up with adversity in my own life, there has been a curiosity to determine what it is that makes some students more successful than others who experience similar circumstances. This researcher has been able to determine some commonalities within the responses I received from this narrative study. In exploring this topic, it has been critical that this researcher understands the multiple biases that I bring to this topic, by understanding the cultural, environmental, socioeconomic and other influences that have shaped my perspective and position, in the development of this problem of practice. An awareness of these biases and efforts to keep an open mind while researching a problem are critical needs of the scholar practitioner.

These internal biases stem predominantly from the environment I was raised in. In my working class family, being raised by a father who did not graduate from high school, high academic achievement was not recognized in a significant way, nor was there an expectation that any of the family members attend college. In fact, there was often criticism of the need for a college degree, rather than encouragement to attend college. The assumption could be that families with less education are less likely to expect their children to attend college. My belief related to this assumption is that children of all backgrounds and environments can develop
resiliency and be motivated to achieve college and career success, in spite of a lack of family support.

In addition to being raised by less educated parents, I also have a diverse cultural background, raised as an Irish, Czech, Bohemian, German-American with the multi-cultural experiences that shaped my upbringing. Which of these biases might have impacted me the most as I sought to define how to shape individuals who may not have the right environment to shape their success? All of my experiences and environmental influences, including race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers have created my biases and shaped my opinions, feelings, and intuitions (Carlton Parsons 2008; Jupp & Slattery 2006). It has been important not to place any of these biases in the forefront or to identify with any one aspect of my biases (Briscoe 2005). As indicated by Milner (2007), researchers must pay close attention to their cultural and racial biases in order to be effective in their scholarly work. The cultural and socioeconomic biases I present with allow me to believe that any child can be motivated to succeed, if she has a growth mindset and is intrinsically motivated.

Helping to instill intrinsic motivation and develop resiliency within students who have been exposed to adversity, in order to promote college and career success and successful future outcomes, is something I have been passionate about. As a former middle school and elementary teacher for 15 years, and currently as a district administrator in my 8th year, I have constantly sought ways to build rigor and promote high expectations for all students, to improve college and career outcomes. Partly, I have sought to understand what made me motivated to succeed, in the absence of an academically supportive environment, and also in the face of adversity, again, in the hope that I may figure out strategic ways to turn students “on,” or to instill in them a desire to succeed, even in spite of a lack of family support or an otherwise supportive environment.
As an Assistant Superintendent of Schools, in a PreK-12 public school setting, in a working class community, I have struggled to determine better ways to support my administrators and staff, given the changing demographics that have evolved in the last decade or so in the town. Far too often, I see evidence that biases exist and that many educators seem ill equipped to adapt to the changing demographics and diverse needs of the students attending their classrooms. More frequently, students are presenting with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and many don’t have supportive environments to help motivate them for successful outcomes. There is an increasing need for educators to provide greater supports to motivate students for college and career success. How do they do this more effectively?

In my district role, I feel that I need to continue to help my principals and evaluators improve in their evaluation and support of the educators in their buildings, in order to promote ways to further help students become motivated for success. In these diverse socioeconomic and cultural learning environments teachers are surrounded by, many teachers require additional supports to meet the diverse of all the students that they are presented with in the general classroom and in the special education setting. I am hopeful that my research, along with other research involving the self-determination theory will help impact learning in a meaningful way and impact other educator’s ability to promote high standards for college and career success for students who may present from more diverse, but less supportive environmental backgrounds.

In my current leadership role in a public school district, I have observed that the families of some of the students seem to view a vocation as the final stop on their children’s path, rather than an opportunity to extend their goals to further career opportunities or higher education. It is my belief that administrators can work to promote college and career readiness through creation of higher expectations from both educators and parents, collectively, through parent engagement
opportunities and the application of specific spiraling activities by educators to promote intrinsic motivation and self-awareness of students in relationship to college and career goal-setting (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, Zane, 2007).

Parental support in the student environment in adolescent years directly impacts student level of career aspiration and future career success (Herlickson, et al., 2009). The family environment can also present with challenges, and children who are resilient tend to overcome some of the adverse childhood experiences they are exposed to, as documented by Werner (2012) when referencing her longitudinal studies. I have, unfortunately, also observed the impact of an environment on students who have not had high expectations set from the external environment, in order to have their goals supported or that allowed them to think of expanding their future college and career aspirations. I recall, for example, a particular fourth grade student in a low-income Title I school, in which I taught. As part of a lesson in writing, I asked my fourth graders what they wanted to be when they grew up. Students provided various careers they were interested in. One child indicated she wanted to work at Dunkin Donuts, like her mother. Her family was poor and on welfare, her parents and a number of her older teenage siblings had been arrested for drug use and robberies, and there were a number of teen pregnancies amongst her siblings as well. The socioeconomic status and family environment were directly impacting the child’s academic and career aspirations (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011).

It may have been the first time anyone had discussed future careers with most of the students in this class of fourth graders, as many of them were raised in homes with low socioeconomic status. Sadly, this child later went on to become a teen mother on welfare herself. This discussion and work on careers alone was unable to help her avoid the pattern of
behavior she seemed destined to follow. I often wonder what I could have done as her teacher that may have motivated her for future success and/or helped her to become more resilient when meeting with adversity, or whether or not anything I did in the classroom could have made a difference. As such, it was my desire to conduct a study to determine how students who come from challenging backgrounds were able to remain motivated and resilient despite their environmental circumstances.

**Significance of the Study**

Given that I utilized eight students or former graduates as participants from the high school in the public school district within which I work, this narrative study should be significant on a micro level to the student and teaching population in the school district. Hopefully, it could help the school district better identify specific interventions that can be used to promote college and career success to meet the needs of the diverse student population. From learning about what these resilient student participants felt would benefit other students on their quests to academic success and from determining what actually motivated these student participants to meet with academic success, I believe it should help the school district to better determine focus areas for professional development of the teaching staff, in order to better meet the needs of the student population.

On a macro level, this narrative study could serve to help other school districts with similar demographics to determine and identify the programmatic changes needed in their schools that could better serve their students as well. Although my school district is considered to be suburban, it tends to resemble some of the neighboring, more urban communities, rather than identify with many of the neighboring suburban communities, given the working class population and the increased cultural diversity, resulting from an influx of students from about
40 different languages and even more cultural backgrounds and from the increasing development of transient living situations for homeless students from all over Massachusetts. With a teaching population that lacks diversity, coupled with one of the lowest tax revenues in the state, the schools do not have sufficient funding to adequately meet the needs of this diverse student population. However, these students are attending our schools and deserve to receive an education that helps them to be successful in their future college and career outcomes. This problem is not unique to my school district and this study should help others to identify areas of improvement for the existing programs as well.

**Research Questions**

Students present at school with many different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as varying learning styles that impact motivation toward learning. Understanding what it is that motivates individual students and maximizing these components in the educational environment is critical to the future college and career success of today’s students. Additionally, helping them to develop more resilience in the face of adversity related to the environment may also lead them to success.

The main research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What do students who have demonstrated success despite having had to overcome adversity attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically or otherwise?

2. How do these students who have grown up in a challenging environment or have had obstacles to overcome believe their resilience has contributed to their overall success, as perceived by the student?
3. Despite having had challenges to overcome, were there specific people that supported them and helped these academically successful students overcome their personal adversity? How?

**Theoretical Framework**

Two theories were used to review the commentary of the students of this study: Self-determination Theory and Resilience Theory.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory focuses on both intrinsic motivation (that which is inherent) and extrinsic motivation (that which results from a reward or consequence) (Moran, Diefendorff, Kim, & Liu, 2012). Although I feel intrinsic motivation is necessary for academic success, I also believe educators can apply strategic interventions to help to motivate students for academic success, and that this external motivation can enhance students’ innate, intrinsic motivation for future college and career success. Self-determination theory is grounded on the premise that basic psychological needs are necessary for optimal functioning and individual well being (Milyavskaya, & Koestner, 2011). Given its theoretical context, self-determination theory lended itself nicely as the theoretical framework for my research topic.

Self-determination theory (SDT) references three areas of psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness, all of which are said to be necessary for optimal functioning and growth of individuals (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is a broad framework for studying human motivation and personality (Ryan & Deci, 2015). SDT includes six mini-theories: Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CDT), Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), Causality Orientations Theory (COT), Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), Goal Contents Theory (GCT), and Relationships Motivation Theory (RMT) (Ryan & Deci, 2015). The six mini-
theories together make up the SDT model. My research focuses more closely with the Cognitive Evaluation Theory, which studies intrinsic motivation, a critical component for success in education (Ryan & Deci, 2015).

Seminal authors of the self-determination theory include Maslow (1908-1970), who developed the Hierarchy of Needs related to human motivation and leading to self-actualization. Maslow describes the areas of need as physiological, safety, love/ belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Taormina & Gao, 2013). The physiological needs include basic needs such as food and water; the safety needs include things like a home and guardian, belongingness includes love, support, warmth, and affection; esteem needs satisfactions includes both self-esteem and esteem from other people; and self-actualization includes things like self-fulfillment, self-acceptance, and gratification of one’s own wishes (Taormina & Gao, 2013). The self-actualization at the top of the hierarchy related most closely with my work on motivation for future success.

Deci’s (1942-present) early work references Cognitive Evaluation Theory which studies the controlling and informational aspects of rewards (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981). His early works around the Cognitive Evaluation Theory supported later research specific to self-determination theory. These early works looked at intrinsically motivated behaviors involving
basic human needs around human competence and self-determination, as well as the two psychological processes affecting one’s intrinsic motivation (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981). Varying research on motivational theories relate directly to the research on the self-determination theory. SDT also focuses on autonomous motivation, which is made up of intrinsic motivation and the type of extrinsic motivation that helps people feel a sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Individual motivation levels vary dramatically from individual to individual, and the premise of this study is that teachers might benefit from strategic intervention training to increase individual students’ intrinsic motivational levels of the varied diverse leaners presented within a typical classroom. Self-determination theory concerns itself with human motivation, personality and the autonomy for facilitating optimal functioning, growth, social development and personal well-being and the tendencies to behave in healthy ways by setting and achieving academic goals which relate to college and career success (Ryan & Deci, 2000), While Self-determination Theory has strong ties to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors and the metatheory framing other motivational studies, the focus on intrinsic motivation and how it helps sustain long-term goals provided a strong framework for my qualitative research study.

**Resilience theory.** The Resilience Theory was also used to inform the analysis of comments from the students who participated in the study. Emmy Werner, professor of Human Development, started to use the term resilience beginning in the 1970’s. Resilience is considered a “multi-systemic phenomenon that can occur across the lifespan” (Greene, Galambos, Lee, 2004, p. 78). Resilience involves internal characteristics, such as, temperament and intelligence, but also involves the ability to receive positive adult support (Aldwin, Cunningham, & Taylor, 2010). Werner’s (1992) forty-year longitudinal study starting in 1955 in Kauai, Hawaii, determined that one third of children with reproductive and environmental high risk factors
demonstrated resilience and became competent and caring adults. Werner (1984) points out that children who are resilient often are able to receive emotional support outside of the family, when the family unit is incapable of providing that support, and a favorite teacher can become an important role model to some resilient children. Her early work on the Resilience Theory has led to works by many other researchers. Greene’s, Galambos’s, and Lee’s (2004) research also emphasizes that schools with teachers that are nurturing and supportive can help promote resilience of students. Later research by Werner (1995) describes the need for increasing competencies of children, while attempting to decrease exposure to risk factors. Werner’s (2012) research related to resilience points out that school-based interventions can help reduce Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can lead to more successful outcomes for students. The Resilience Theory was very applicable to the problem of practice.

Werner’s (2012) research on resilience studied risk factors of children who had been exposed to intense trauma through their exposure to war. Children exposed to war commonly note symptoms related to PTSD, but these risk factors can be mitigated and children can become resilient by having strong relationships with caregivers and teachers and peers (Werner, 2012). Conversely, adverse perinatal and early childrearing experiences without pro-social relationships do not develop resilience in the same manner and can even have higher mortality rates (Werner, 2012). Given the increase in social-emotional issues that are being documented in public school districts, there seems to be an inherent need to foster these pro-social relationships, in order to increase the resiliency of children to meet with overall success.

More recent research related to resilience includes works by Carol Dweck on Growth Mindset, as well as related works by Angela Duckworth on Grit. Dweck (2007) studied why some children enjoyed learning, even when faced with obstacles, and how some types of praise
can lead to motivation and resiliency in children when they develop a Growth Mindset. Dweck (2010) notes that students with a growth mindset believe their intelligence will develop over time and can overcome setbacks, similar to Werner’s understanding of resiliency in children.

Teachers can foster a Growth Mindset in children. In Dweck’s (2006) book on Mindset, she details how to praise students effectively, in order to encourage Growth Mindset/ build resilience. Grit also seems to overlap with resilience. Similar to resilience, grittier students are able to succeed academically, even in the presence of setbacks and obstacles to their success (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Perkins-Gough (2013) notes Duckworth as stating, “Grit is related because part of what it means to be gritty is to be resilient in the face of failure or adversity.”(p.1) Grit is also described as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). There seems to be a direct correlation between Werner’s early works on resilience, Dweck’s work on Mindset and Duckworth’s more recent work on Grit. The works of all three supported my work on resilience and intrinsic motivation of students.

Conclusion

Self-determination theory relates to personality and human motivation and encompasses both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Dahl & Smimou, 2011). Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes that intrinsic goals and motivation are associated with greater performance, health, and well being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, those who are intrinsically motivated to succeed may also be better able to focus on remaining on a positive trajectory, leading to more successful outcomes. Therefore, the SDT provided a cohesive framework for the qualitative narrative study I completed.

Using a qualitative approach and the lens of self-determination theory, I was confident that my research questions would lead me to meaningful insights. Since I was able to pre-screen
self-motivated students who presented as high achievers, prior to including them as participants in the study, I relied exclusively on educator and counselor input in order to determine the fit for the research process. Through demonstrating inherent resilience, this helped me to assess what motivated these individuals to succeed. It was important for me to pre-determine that certain characteristics are present within chosen participants, prior to any false assumption that there was inherent resiliency within the individuals. Educators who worked with these students had a good sense of which of their own students had already demonstrated resiliency by overcoming challenges in their environmental support system.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Increasing both intrinsic motivation and resiliency of students are necessary foci in today’s educational programs with the expectation being to promote high academic achievement to support College and Career Readiness for all learners (Linnenbrink, & Pintrich, 2002; Rowell, 2013; McMillan, & Reed, 1994; and Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008).

There are some central topics in the literature and research to explore in relationship to the Problem of Practice as identified. One area I explored in the literature is how intrinsic motivation relates to students’ future success. There are several studies which detail how motivation may lead to eventual success, including that of Becker, McElvany, and Kortenbruck (2010), Alfassi (2004), Burton, Lydon, D’Alessandro, and Koestner (2006), Cameron, Pierce, Banko, and Gear (2005), Dahl, and Smimou (2011), Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996), as well as many others. Second, I reviewed literature pertaining to the impact of intrinsic motivation on academics. Researchers in this area include Dahl and Smimou (2011), Wang (2006), Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006), Thorkildsen, Nolen, and Fournier (1994), Skinner, & Belmont (1993), Rugutt (2009), Pintich (2003), and others. Third, it was important to gain a better understanding of how environment can impact motivation. Much research has been conducted on the impact of environment on motivation and academic success, including research by Wang (2006), Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy and Mercado (2011), Alfassi (2004), Garn & Jolly (2014), DeDonno and Fagan (2013), Gonzalez (2002), and Eccles et al, (1993). By examining many examples of research related to environmental factors, one expected outcome of this study was to be able to determine which factors might be impacting student motivation the most, in order to develop a plan to motivate students toward learning, despite some of the additional factors that
could be inhibiting student success. Next, I reviewed some of the same literature listed above to determine how intrinsic motivation can be impacted, leading to greater resiliency and college and career success. Finally, I reviewed the literature on both the development of grit and the fostering of resilience in students to support a growth mindset and academic success. Some research in this area includes works by Dweck (2006), Duckworth (2013), Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007), Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2004), Harvey (2007), McMillan and Reed (1994), Prince-Embury (2008), and Richardson (2002). The literature in each of these areas is reviewed here in each of the next six sections of the body. By researching what has already been shown to motivate students and develop resilience to achieve academic success, some of these methods could be incorporated into this narrative study, in order to better understand the individual student stories.

**Motivation and Academic Success**

**Intrinsic motivation and future success.** Without intrinsic motivation for high academic achievement, the likelihood that many of today’s students will succeed in the fields they enter will continue to diminish (Rowell, 2013). In order to counter the complacency that seems to be rampant in many of today’s students, it will be helpful to understand what will increase intrinsic motivation, from the perspective of students who have demonstrated academic success, so that educators will be better able to help motivate students for college and career success.

Many educators struggle to solve the problem of how to motivate students, in settings throughout K-12 classrooms, in both regular and special education, and within higher education as well. In particular, adolescents are shown to be less motivated to succeed when they do not receive opportunities for age appropriate decision-making in the classroom from teachers that
may be unaware (Eccles, et al., 1993). Also, students who are economically disadvantaged may have additional motivational challenges and require higher levels of school bonding from educators to help them develop realistic future aspirations (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy & Mercado, 2011). For those educators, like myself, who may have been intrinsically motivated in school and who have potentially gained resilience and confidence through the acquisition of an education, it may be a problem that can be difficult to relate to and to determine how to overcome in their students. Like educators, parents may also become frustrated with the seeming lack of ability to motivate their children as well and can benefit from support and communication from school counselors (Griffin & Galassi, 2010). When parents have consistently shown interest and been involved in their child’s education, even in high school, their children are more likely to accept challenges and be successful in school (Gonzalez, 2002). In a fair and just classroom setting, teacher leaders can trigger students’ innate drive to be both self-determined and autonomous in the learning process (Bowman, 2011). If educators could understand what interests individual students and then utilize this to trigger intrinsic motivation of students in order to increase self-motivation over time, then some of today’s struggling, unmotivated students could become more self-aware and intrinsically motivated for success (Madsen, 2003).

The need to increase intrinsic motivation to improve college and career success seems to be related to a cultural need in the United States, in particular, as it appears that other cultures have different expectations and approaches towards education (Pink, 2006). Students from the United States are not competing with students from other countries who can provide career services at lesser rates, which requires that American students develop different, marketable skills, as defined by today’s Conceptual Age (Pink, 2006). McEvoy’s (2011) research supports the need to increase intrinsic motivation for successful future outcomes, in addition to Madsen
(2003) pointing out ideas for motivating for success, which is critical for today’s students. Therefore, in an attempt to develop an understanding of what will potentially help today’s students become more motivated to succeed in the global world, this study was focused specifically to include the population of high school senior students within my current K-12 public school district located in a predominantly working class community.

The next sections present the various topics researched that relate to my overarching Problem of Practice. This section first examines whether or not intrinsic motivation does have a direct impact on future success, followed by examining the impact of the environment on intrinsic motivation and college and career success, and then consider what can be done to increase intrinsic motivation of students for college and career success.

**Impact of intrinsic motivation on academic success.** There is much research detailing how intrinsic motivation contributes to individual and personal success. Dahl and Smimou (2011), for example, show that by understanding how student perception of teaching quality promotes intrinsic motivation, educators can expand the way they instruct students in order to implement a better educational system. Intrinsically motivated students tend to be more creative and innovative and perform better under difficult circumstances, leading to more successful outcomes (McEvoy, 2011). Wang (2006) describes the use of a web-based environment to positively impact student motivation for success. Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) describe the effects of teacher behavior on student motivation, while Thorkildsen, Nolen, and Fournier (1994) describe practices that influence student motivation in the classroom. There is no doubt of how important motivation is in the classroom and of how important it is to tap student intrinsic motivation through the learning environment (Skinner, & Belmont, 1993). Rugutt (2009) points out how teacher and student relationships can help motivate students to learn as well.
Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) emphasize how important it is for both educators and school psychologists to use the learning environment to focus on four key components of motivation, rather than blaming students for being “unmotivated.” As teachers develop better instructional practices in the classroom, this can lead to more invested learners, which can ultimately lead to cognition and further motivation of learners (Pintrich, 2003). All of this can be critical to successful academic outcomes for students.

People who are intrinsically motivated seem to set and achieve goals that are personally fulfilling and these people also achieve at higher levels of success (Harackiewicz & Elliot (1993). Students who are intrinsically motivated tend to pursue tasks for pleasure and, when they are encouraged in younger years, they tend to be more motivated for academic success in later years as well (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). These individuals are typically able to self-regulate better towards attainment of their goals and overcome setbacks, as the sense of well-being is not impacted as negatively when one is motivated to succeed (Burton et al., 2006). This ability to self-regulate by intrinsically motivated individuals increases the likelihood of a successful career. An additional study, by Becker et al. (2010) indicates that student intrinsic reading motivation is a strong predictor of how much students tend to read, and it appears that this would likely increase academic achievement in reading and other content areas as well. This intrinsic reading motivation, however, is partly determined by early reading literacy success (Becker et al., 2010). Students may be more motivated to read when they are able to achieve reading literacy in the early years, indicating a strong need to increase reading instruction in these years, to begin to develop more intrinsic motivation towards reading. Early reading acquisition and motivation should lead to more academic success overall, as the
increasing need for literate individuals has been identified by higher education institutions. Each of these studies indicates that intrinsic motivation positively impacts academic success.

A number of studies demonstrate that intrinsic motivation supports the acquisition of knowledge and skills in academic settings. In a study by Berger and Karabenick (2011), an increased use of learning strategies in mathematics classrooms was attributed to intrinsically motivated students vs. their counterparts. This could indicate that motivated students are more likely to be more successful, as they are more inclined to use strategies that will lead to success. In a study on teacher leadership and intellectual stimulation by Bolk, Goodboy, & Griffin (2011), research indicates that when teachers are able to positively influence intrinsic motivation of students, these students approach studying of material more deeply, which also tends to lead to greater academic success. These researchers seem to support the connection of intrinsic motivation to deeper studying and enhanced use of strategies to support instruction, which indicates how motivation may lead to greater academic success.

Research by Wang (2006), Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006), Thorkildsen et al. (1994), Rugutt (2009), Pintrich (2003) and many other studies related to intrinsic motivation and its connection to academic success, indicates that intrinsic motivation can have a positive impact upon and is more likely lead to both academic and college and career success. Therefore, it seems there is a definite need to ensure that students have increased intrinsic motivation, in order to ensure they are successful in relationship to the college and career goals they set, and in order to set higher academic goals to pursue in the future.

**Impact of the environment on intrinsic motivation and college and career success.**

Students’ environments seem to have a direct impact on their level of intrinsic motivation and future success. Educators need to encourage parental involvement, even in the later high school
years, as the impact of environment on students who have not had high expectations set from the external environment, in order to have their goals supported, or that may have allowed them to think of expanding their future college and career aspirations can be detrimental to academic success (Eccles, 1993). Often the socioeconomic status can directly impact a child’s academic and career aspirations as well, as students with lesser resources and parents with little education tend to have unrealistic aspirations, which can further impact future success (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011). Negative behavior patterns can develop at young ages and inhibit future success. These patterns of behaviors and apathy about future careers seem to be set for some at a young age. The exposure to other options needs to be early and repetitive, in order to change some of the environmental beliefs that unknowing family members may instill in young minds. In a study by Lindholm (2004), the environment is described as critical in the development of career aspirations, in addition to the role of self and others in shaping future outcomes. Whatever the reason for the environmental belief, the relationship between personal and environmental variables seems to have a correlation to academic achievement and success. A study by Hirschi (2011) describes interventions that can be applied to prevent developmental problems and enhance positive career development. More research on the impact of the environment on motivation and how to provide children with career options at younger ages should take place. Given additional time to research, I feel it was important to explore ways to support students who don't come from environments that encourage them to think "outside the box," and to help these same students to become familiar with the many different career opportunities available to them, once they are motivated to succeed. Environments that promote academic motivation are important, but alternative ways to motivate are necessary as well.
A number of environmental factors seem to impact both academic and future success. During the adolescent middle school years, students may become alienated from both friends and family, and parents have been shown to be less involved than in the primary years, which can directly impact academic achievement, particularly for students who are at risk (Griffin, & Galassi, 2010). Parental involvement and monitoring of their children’s whereabouts have shown to have a positive impact on educational achievement but can also negatively impact student engagement in high risk behaviors (Gonzalez, 2002; and Herlickson, et al., 2009). Personality and family values that children were raised with also have a direct impact on motivation (Parks, & Guay, 2009). The study by Gonzalez (2002) showed that parent involvement in homework, school events, sports, and other extra-curricular events, even into the high school years, has a positive impact on student motivation, engagement, and academic success. This would further indicate the need for strong family involvement, as well as support the belief that the environment does have a direct impact on academic success. The study by Herlickson, et al. (2009) also supports the importance of parental involvement and monitoring in adolescent years and its positive impact on academic engagement and success. A study by Rowell (2013), describes various approaches that can be used by counselors, in the absence of the necessary family support for academic motivation. College and career success seems to be directly impacted by these environmental factors, but schools can help lessen the negative impact the environment might have on academic achievement.

**How to increase intrinsic motivation to improve college and career success.**

Numerous studies have explored ways to increase student motivation for overall success. Detailed below are a number of examples of studies that have been undertaken to increase student motivation, and some of these are outlined somewhat in this section.
The effects of achievement goals on intrinsic motivation have been noted in various studies discussed here. The study by Harackiewicz and Elliot (1993) noted that the use of achievement goals can enhance intrinsic motivation, if and when the goal is consistent with the type of competence information provided and expected. In a later study by Lee, McInerney, Liem, and Ortiga, (2010), it is indicated that clear goal setting which aligns with one’s future can also increase one’s motivation to achieve these goals. Both studies, though limited in focus and study of academic domains, would seem to indicate that effective goal setting likely could improve intrinsic motivation and later success. Rowell (2013) also notes a positive correlation between mastery goal setting and intrinsic motivation and teachers can help students set appropriate goals. In addition, educators can increase motivation just by developing a more varied teaching schedule to increase perseverance in learning and leading to more success in learning (Madsen, 2003). Teachers can also help students become more motivated by creating effective collaborative learning groups in the classroom where they are expected to develop rubrics together and set high standards together to motivate one another (Simmons & Page, 2010). As educators, helping students develop academic and future goals that are realistic and attainable and setting up learning environments with collaborative learning environments may be worth pursuing in academic settings from early ages, and throughout the educational process, with the hope to increase motivation for college and career success.

A number of researchers including: Henderlong and Lepper (2002), Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008), Simmons and Page (2002), Pulfrey, Darnon, and Butera, (2013), and Au (2013) have also attempted to determine what increases intrinsic motivation of students. Additionally, some of these same researchers have determined that external motivators, such as rewards or praise, have either no impact or a negative impact on student motivation. In the study
by Henderlong and Leper (2002), it was determined that praise can be both motivating and detrimental to intrinsic motivation. When considered to be sincere, praise can be a powerful motivator to student achievement. However, when praise is not deemed as sincere by the receiver or, at times, if the praise is given publicly in front of a peer group, then it may actually have a negative impact upon intrinsic motivation (Henderlong, & Lepper, 2002). In contrast, when students are given relevant choices of activities, they tend to be more intrinsically motivated to succeed (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). Similarly, when students are given choice and a voice in how they are graded, for example, through the use of rubrics and collaboration, they also appear to be motivated to learn and succeed in the academic setting (Simmons, & Page 2010). Similar to praise, grading without autonomy and choice can either enhance or diminish intrinsic motivation. Although at times grades may hold a socially symbolic value for a student, grades can also be perceived as a controlling influence for students that tend to diminish the motivational impact (Pulfrey, Daron, & Butera, 2013). Teachers at the high school level should have higher expectations for literacy of students, to both motivate and prepare for college success (Au, 2013). Kusurkar, Croiset, and Cate (2011) offer twelve simple tips to stimulate intrinsic motivation in the classroom for academic success by providing an autonomy-supportive environment, as defined by the Self-Determination Theory. Ultimately, whether it be grades, praise, rewards, or choice, it seems more important how one applies the tool, rather than what is used to motivate students, that can have the most positive impact on intrinsic motivation of students overall.

**Resilience and Academic Success.**

**Developing grit/ perseverance to increase likelihood of success.** Developing student capacity to learn and succeed and increasing and enhancing intrinsic motivation need to be
promoted in the educational environment, but how do we develop “grit” among students to encourage them to persevere when challenges and obstacles hinder success along the way? Grit, like intrinsic motivation, is hard to measure, but it has recently been shown to be a predictor of future success. “Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years.” (Duckworth, 2013, 3:02-3:15). Those of us who are intrinsically motivated to succeed typically seem to exemplify “grit” as well. Grit relates to ones’ growth mindset and the positive way one views life and overcomes obstacles (Dweck, 2006). Von Culin, Tsukayama & Duckworth (2014) describe grit as being associated with finding meaning and purpose in life and related to “drive” to sustain focus over time. In a conversation about grit and resilience with Duckworth, Perkins-Gough (2013) delved into the relationship between grit and resilience, and Duckworth emphasized that both grit and resilience have a positive response to adversity and failure. Grit can be just as important as talent in achievement of long-term and difficult goals, since grit relates to the stamina necessary for high achievement (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). In a study by Robertson-Kraft and Duckworth (2014), it was found that teachers who demonstrate grit themselves tend to be more effective teachers and are more likely to be retained by administrators, which would likely be beneficial to the students they instruct in becoming “grittier.” Duckworth and Gross (2014) found that there is a relationship between grit and self-control as well, and both together can help students align their actions to their intended successful outcomes. As educators help students develop intrinsic motivation for college and career success, we also should help them to develop perseverance to channel their inner resilience and “grit” to push forward on a positive, successful path in life.
Dweck’s research (2006) is referenced in the YouTube video noted above. A growth mindset is considered to be far more impactful in promoting effective change than the fixed mindset that many individuals identify with. A growth mindset supports the ability to be gritty and resilient and persevere when obstacles arise, and this needs to be firmly promoted in students’ daily repertoire (Dweck, 2006). Dweck’s (2010) research explains that it is so important to foster a growth mindset because students with this mindset look at challenging work as an opportunity for growth, relish challenges, and are not afraid to take risks in school. It is important for educators to develop resiliency, and it is possible to establish even when students may have had negative beliefs related to mindset from their environments (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Contrary to the belief of many, intellectual ability is not a fixed trait but one that can be developed through both education and effort (Dweck, 2007). People that have a growth mindset believe that talents and abilities can develop over time and will try to avail themselves of resources and supports available in the school setting (Dweck, 2009). As educators, we can support a growth mindset by moving students away from reinforcing “smartness.” Rather, we should be positively reinforcing resilience and a growth mindset in students, as these are greater predictors of success.

The term grit is closely linked with resilience. Fostering resiliency, by encouraging positive attitudes and emotions in both students and staff in school settings has been noted to lead to academic success. Prince-Embury (2008) notes how important it is that teachers receive appropriate training that will allow them to develop resilient mindsets within their students, in order to improve academic outcomes. The ability to succeed, even when there is much adversity in one’s life, stems from resiliency, which helps one to cope effectively with difficulties (Harvey, 2007). Administrators can enhance the development of resilience of educators and students by
setting up the school environment with specific structures in place to support pro-social behaviors. Children who are resilient have better coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and are able to adjust better in difficult situations, allowing for more successful outcomes, and families can also help foster this resilient behavior (Hetherington & Blechman, 1996). Milstein (2000) details a blueprint that can be utilized by schools to spread resiliency in young people to improve the school culture as a whole and lead to more successful outcomes for staff and students. At-risk students who have developed resilience have been shown to meet with better success at school and have more positive goals and plans for the future, and teachers can play an important role in developing resilience within all students (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Given the research supporting the interconnectedness of resiliency and school success, school districts could benefit from utilizing tools to promote resiliency within school settings and programs.

While the research on growth mindset is relatively new, we need to develop this concept within our teachers, too, as it will build capacity to promote and implement effective changes in our public school district. This idea of “grit” and resilience also needs to be further researched and studied, as, along with students, educators need to be able to persevere and work through everyday challenges when they meet with obstacles in educating individual students (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). In continuing to explore more research on how to increase intrinsic motivation of students, it will be important to focus on the concepts of developing a growth mindset and/or resiliency of individuals, as they seem to go hand-in-hand in increasing college and career success for all learners.

**How resilience can be fostered.** There is much research to support that resilience can be fostered and developed within students to help them overcome challenges in their paths to college and career success. A study by Harvey (2007) found that teaching students to believe in
themselves and encouraging them to express emotions and develop positive attitudes can help them to become more resilient, so that they do not give up when things become difficult. In addition, teachers who make the effort to support students and believe in them has been shown to foster resilience in students who may not have otherwise have had a supportive environment (Greene, Galambos, & Lee, 2004). McMillan and Reed (1994) also point out the importance of the teacher role in student resilience. They indicate that teachers who listen to students, and are caring, encouraging, and respectful make a difference in the resiliency of at-risk students. Fink (2013) provides ten simple tips teachers can use to promote resilience and perseverance, including things like helping students to find their passion to keep going when things get tough, building upon individual student strengths, encouraging a growth mindset toward learning, and grading students in relationship to their persistence and effort during the learning process. Carol Dweck has completed much research on the impact of a growth mindset in fostering resilience and Yeager and Dweck (2012) found that students become more resilient when they have had educators who have consistently redirected them and helped them develop a mindset that they can overcome challenges over time and with effort. Dweck (2007) notes the importance of appropriate praise to promote resilience and motivation; praising students for being engaged, persevering, using strategies, and continuing to improve is motivating, while praising intelligence of students can actually lead to a fixed mindset. The importance of teachers in building a classroom culture that promotes a growth mindset cannot be overrated, as it has been found to foster resiliency and long-term achievement goals in students (Dweck, 2010). Helping to develop positive attitudes, believing in, listening to, and caring for students, encouraging students to find passion, developing growth mindsets, and use of effective praise are some of the ways teachers can foster resilience in their student population.
There are other, additional ways teachers can foster resilience in students. Student involvement in extracurricular offerings and volunteerism at school by tutoring or buddying with other students, which could lead to a sense of accomplishment, have been shown to foster resilience in students (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Habib, Zimmerman and Ostaszewski (2014) found that extracurricular activities at school, which are often run by teachers, could help students learn social roles and competencies, promoting the development of resilience in youth. Research by Morrison and Allen (2007) found that learner-centered practices of teachers help to build student self-confidence, autonomy, and independence, which provide a purpose for learning and lead to further resilience in future tasks. It has also been noted that teachers who have high bars for achievement and challenge students, as well as promote pro-social education, seem to enhance resilience in individual students (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002). Zolkoski and Bullock (2012) cite an intervention program called Responsive Advocacy for Life and Learning in Youth (RALLY) that has been utilized in school settings to promote resilience by encouraging positive relationships with teachers and peers. Clearly, teachers and schools can be critical in the academic success of students by fostering resilience in their daily routines.

The importance of fostering resilience in children in school settings should not be overlooked. Werner’s early works studying resilience in students and how it should unfold over a life span has been instrumental in current research on the Resilience Theory (Aldwin, Cunningham & Taylor, 2010). One third of children who have grown up in impoverished homes or with a parent who suffered from alcoholism or psychopathology demonstrate resiliency and tend to meet with successful outcomes in life (Werner, 1995). Today’s children are also presenting with many more mental health issues related to their environments, which further necessitates the need for teachers and school settings to encourage resiliency of students, so they
may continue to learn and be successful, despite the social-emotional concerns (Andrews, McCabe, & Wideman-Johnston, 2014). Children who have suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder related to parents being absent in war have also been found to benefit from teacher interventions in school that promoted resiliency (Werner, 2012). The development of resilience within the school setting can help people to feel more empowered and in control of their own lives, in order to be able to better deal with disruptions that can impact success, which reinforces the importance of fostering resiliency in students (Richardson, 2002).

**Summary**

Through the course of my research, I spent time understanding what students felt had helped them to increase intrinsic motivation and develop resilience to improve their college and career outcomes. This better understanding has helped me to consider better ways to support the number of seemingly unmotivated students within the public school setting I work in. More importantly, I had hoped to develop a repertoire of ideas to support teachers who often give up when faced with the challenge of encouraging their students to meet their full potentials. Too often, when students aren't intrinsically motivated, teachers tend to dumb-down curriculum, rather than set higher expectations for students who may present as challenging in the classroom setting. Although there is much current research that speaks of different ways to motivate students, most researchers talk about setting high expectations and a need for constant feedback as being critical aspects of motivating students. Classroom expectations can have a direct impact on the motivation and achievement of students (Church, 2001). However, although use of effective feedback does seem to help when trying to motivate students on a daily basis, this alone is not sufficient to motivate students to set high expectations for their future college and career goals.
Some of the members of the current generation of learners, in many ways, have become complacent about their futures. This may be partly due to the fact that parents of previous generations have worked hard to provide opportunities for their children that weren't available for them, and the children have not had to earn what the adults in their lives have provided. It is also possible that individuals could lack the confidence or have a fear of failure, or a "failure to launch" approach when considering their future successes. Also evident is that there is a perceived relationship between socioeconomics and family level of education, as well as other factors that can directly impact student motivation. Without being able to get inside the head of the individual, it is difficult to assess the reason leading to the lack of motivation to succeed. Without question, there definitely appears to be a direct relationship between one’s environment and one’s ability to intrinsically self-motivate.

The literature reviewed related to the importance of both intrinsic motivation and resiliency of students supports the need for educators to make efforts to incorporate ways to promote both within their daily repertoire and routines. Given the amount of research, it was very interesting to complete the student interviews and learn what they perceived has helped them to become intrinsically motivated for college and career success and what they believe may have fostered resilience within them, in order for them to be able to overcome challenges and adversity that could have normally impacted academic success.
Chapter III: Research Design

All students do not have equitable environmental supports to help motivate them for college and career success. Many students may even have adversity in their childhoods that can hinder academic success or lack the parental monitoring and support that relates strongly with school engagement and success (Herlickson, et al., 2009). In the absence of supportive environments, students may not realize their full potentials or avail themselves of opportunities in their futures that could lead to successful outcomes. If schools and teachers are unable to provide opportunities to motivate students and develop awareness of career interests, then some students may never achieve at their highest levels of success. Understanding what it is that motivates individuals at early ages and maximizing these necessary components in the educational environment is critical to the future college and career success of today’s students.

The purpose of this narrative study was to better understand what may have motivated certain students to achieve successful academic outcomes, in the absence of environments that promoted college and career success, and what may have helped them develop resilience, despite obstacles in their environments that could have otherwise hindered their successful outcomes. Therefore, a qualitative approach was an appropriate match for the overarching research questions related to student motivation and resiliency of students.

In the hope of better understanding what types of strategies, dispositions, proclivities, and/or capacities contributed to students’ academic success in the face of growing up in difficult or challenging circumstances, the following three research questions guided the design of this study and analysis of data:
1. What do students who have demonstrated success despite having had to overcome adversity attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically or otherwise?

2. How do these students who have grown up in a challenging environment or have had obstacles to overcome believe their resilience has contributed to their overall success, as perceived by the student?

3. Despite having had challenges to overcome, were there specific people that supported them and helped these academically successful students overcome their personal adversity? How?

The study involved interviewing high school seniors who have demonstrated resiliency and motivation in achieving academic success in this researcher’s current public school district. At this stage in the research, the intrinsic motivation of students to achieve successful outcomes despite adversity was generally defined as having demonstrated college and career success level of motivation for similar successful outcomes. Qualitative research is more inductive and shaped by the researcher’s experience in the data collection, rather than developed specifically from the theory or a particular perspective (Creswell, 2013).

Through the interviewing of participants and having them tell their individual stories, this helped me to determine what factors may have motivated them to succeed, in the absence of a motivational environment and how they may have developed resilience to overcome factors in their environments that needed to be overcome in order to meet with success. With a narrative study, the researcher can hear the narrated stories and shape them in a meaningful way, chronologically (Creswell, 2013). Using a qualitative approach and the lenses of both self-determination theory and resilience theory, the approach and theories helped frame the research.
Through the use of a narrative study, common themes emerged that can enable me, as a school district leader, to be better equipped to begin to guide administrators and teachers in understanding what they can do to motivate various types of learners that present in the regular classroom setting and help them develop resiliency to overcome challenges and setbacks, with the hope that more students may achieve successful college and career outcomes.

**Research Design**

A narrative study was very well suited to my research problem. Allen (2006) shares that a narrative study is useful in helping to share participant perspective and voice through rich, detailed stories that can guide the researcher to be both reflective and reflexive. Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin (2013) consider the narrative study to be an “intimate study of an individual’s experience over time and in context(s),” and emphasize the “relational engagement” that narrative inquiry involves. Given my work with teachers and my hope to help them motivate students for college and career success, a narrative study that tells life stories of students can help enlighten teachers in their professional roles and help them improve individual efficacy, since education already employs a narrative approach in teaching as well (Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens 2012). Teachers have the potential to learn a lot from understanding what happens in the lived experiences of students outside of the school setting and better realize how this may impact school success. This past year, in my hope to improve safety and security, all of my teaching staff were trained in trauma sensitive schools training, which helps them to better understand the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) that students may present with in the learning environment, which can lead to negative behavioral and academic outcomes (Cole, 2005). Through the lens of a narrative study, coupled with this recent training, I feel I can understand what ACEs students may have overcome and what motivated them to succeed despite
the adversity. Narrative experiences can shape and provide meaning to theory and research and help to interpret life through the meeting of the inner and outer worlds of the participants (Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens 2012). A narrative approach telling the individual stories can help support teacher development toward increasing student motivation.

The narrative approach was the most effective type of qualitative study for my research topic. Phenomenological studies focus on what the group of participants all have in common when they live through a particular phenomenon. In my case, I did not presuppose that the lived experiences of the individuals would have any common phenomenon to lend itself to a phenomenological lens. A grounded theory approach would be used in trying to develop a specific program or theory of action. If I were hoping to develop a specific program to support student motivation, this approach might be useful, but I did not expect to do so. Ethnographic research focuses on participants from a specific culture or group, to develop an understanding of the culture or group researched. There was no presupposed culture or group studied and no expectations of identifying common cultural themes, as the students could be from varying cultural groups. Finally, a case study was not appropriate for my research, as I had planned to interview participants about the past lived experiences that have lead to their individual successes, and a case study follows an individual over a specific time period (Creswell, 2013). Having reviewed the five basic approaches of qualitative studies, I determined that the narrative approach would best support my problem of practice and help me to gain insights into what motivates students to be successful in college and career outcomes, even in the absence of a motivating home environment or despite childhood adversity that may have inhibited motivation. While phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study approaches may be applicable to other qualitative topics, the components of a narrative approach, with the
interpretive lived stories of the participants, provided this researcher the most help, and allowed me to focus my research in the most meaningful manner as well as construct meaning that can support educator growth in this area.

**Research Tradition**

My qualitative study happened to be a narrative study that was ultimately framed through Self-Determination Theory and Resilience Theory. As I hoped to better understand what motivates students for college and career success, I interviewed individuals who have demonstrated resiliency and motivation for success, despite having had adversity in their childhoods. Students who are very successful often have self-determination, which ultimately showed as one theme that emerged from the study. However, additional themes also emerged and were relative to both the study and the individuals who participated.

Interviewing individuals helped me to both connect with them and to understand what has lead them to the successful outcomes. Narrative research can allow one to describe what has happened in various individual’s lives and narrate their stories to help define the problem of practice (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2013) indicates that narrative research is appropriate for capturing the lives of a small number of individuals and connecting the events captured chronologically, which is what I intend to do. As I had hoped, through the interview process, some common themes did evolve from the individual’s description of their pasts. By better understanding what it is that leads students toward success, then this research can further help me to support teachers in helping to find ways to motivate students so they become more intrinsically motivated to succeed.

Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens (2012) indicate that narrative studies can occur in various forms, including audio and video recordings of stories that come from conversational
discussions or interviews, and that the participants and interviewer develop assumptions that tend to shape the interview process. The data collection can also involve autobiographical writing, such as mine will include, and it may include field notes, journal writing, highlighted transcripts of interviews, and other artifacts (Elbaz-luwisch, 2010). Regardless of the format of the narrative study, like all research studies, the researcher must be cognizant of the ethical issues that can arise during the data collection process. In narrative inquiry, the researcher becomes immersed in the relationship with participants and must interpret the described experiences of the participants (Elbaz-luwisch, 2010). A narrative study can be very personal and the interviewer and those interviewed need to have a trusting relationship, in order for it to be successful, which also requires clear boundaries to be established, to protect the privacy of each participant (Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens, 2012). Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr (2007) consider ethical considerations to be central to narrative inquiry and even more critical than in other types of studies, due to the interpersonal relationships that can occur from the inquiry process between the interviewer and the participants. Given the autobiographical components I did include, the data collection turned out to be both interesting and challenging and it also required the need for participant-inquirer relationships to develop.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are many things one must consider when beginning the research process in any public school district, but, in particular, when one is a district leader in the district used for the research. First of all, for this study it was important to ensure that the research topic was for the betterment of the school district, not just for the researcher. Additionally, it was important not to exclude students from any demographic, as the goal was to determine what motivates students and helps them to become resilient for college and career success. Students from all
socioeconomic levels and cultural backgrounds can be exposed to risk factors in their childhoods, and their stories are valuable. When including potential students, it was important to be sensitive to students from different cultural backgrounds, such as English Language Learner students, as a good researcher must ensure that cultural and language barriers are accounted for in the data-gathering phase. In particular, Briscoe (2005, p. 38) reminds us that, “one must be careful whenever representing the experiences of another, even those of their own social groups, but especially those whose social identities differ significantly from their own.” It was also very important to ensure anonymity of those involved in the research and be respectful of the differences people present with in the research process.

**Feasibility of Study**

Given the demographics of the school district utilized, it was important to ensure that the population of students interviewed demonstrated the resilience and intrinsic motivation described in the study. By focusing on one grade level of high school seniors who had proven to be successful, I felt this was reasonable, and it allowed me to gain a wide-range of data identifying environmental differences towards promotion of college and career success. The diverse backgrounds of the student population provided meaningful data to help determine the next steps for the school district in developing programs or implementing strategies to increase intrinsic motivation of students for college and career success.

Participation in the study was voluntary, but it was encouraged of seniors who were recommended to me by the educators and/ or adjustment counselors who worked with them. Anonymity was ensured and was promoted to the students, in order to increase their participation. In addition, interview questions would be translated into additional languages, if
this had been necessary, in order to include all types of students, to avoid cultural barriers in completion of the surveys.

Given that state data indicates that only 70% of students graduating from the school district studied attend college, which is lower than surrounding school districts, the study was likely to be relevant and appropriate to the needs of the school district, to promote college and career success for students.

**Site and Participants**

In the suburban community where my research took place, the student population has changed in recent years. Despite being located in the suburbs and having primarily a working class population, the demographics of this community have changed significantly, leading to more diversity within the school population, and some inequitable learning experiences for students. Over the last 15 years, the student population has increased from 6% to 22% non-white students. The twelve schools house students with about 40 different languages and even more varying cultures. There is much diversity in the socioeconomic statuses of students as well, depending upon the part of town students are located in. Yet, all eight primary schools feed directly into one grade 5-6 middle school that houses about 1,000 students. This community has been described as a working class community, with only about 72% of students attending college, as compared to neighboring communities of 85-90% or higher. For a number of years, the low tax base has not supported the proper funding of the schools, and the per pupil expenditure just recently reached the state average, compared to other communities that fund the schools up to 120% of the state average, or well above the state average. It is not a typical south shore suburban community like those nearby. This community has also been perceived as one
that does not support education, but the school district and school community members have been working hard to change this perception.

The high school that my participants attend houses close to two thousand students in grades nine to twelve, with almost 500 seniors. There are many advanced placement/college preparatory classes, but students may also choose to enroll in a career technical educational program. There, they can attain certificates in ten different areas. As a result, students can graduate high school with a certificate that allows them to begin a worthy career that may or may not help fund a college degree in the future. The director of the programs has been trying to encourage students in these programs to consider an advanced degree as well. There is a wide range in the academic success levels, motivation, and resilience that the high school students exhibit. Participants could include students who would be attending college or those who planned to begin a successful career after high school, but all who volunteered happened to have the goal of pursuing a college education.

The population I utilized in the study included a number of high school seniors who have demonstrated academic success, despite having had adversity to overcome in their childhoods. There are a number of students who struggle within the community and the schools, as they may not be having their needs adequately met from the various environmental settings. Still, many students with adversity are able to succeed academically and aspire to successful college and career opportunities in their futures. I reached out to the high school guidance and adjustment counseling teams and took time to meet with the group so that they could understand my criteria and recommend participants that fit the purpose of this narrative study. The criteria for participation indicated that students had to have demonstrated an ability to overcome adversity, as described by Werner (2012), in their lives to achieve successful academic outcomes. In order
to determine the student resilience and motivation levels, input from their educational team was sought. The educational team knew which students have had adverse childhood experiences that could impact success, if the child is not resilient enough to overcome these experiences.

The sample size included a total of 8 students from various backgrounds and/ or socioeconomic status, and who demonstrated the common themes of resilience and academic motivation. Gender was not screened out in any way. Given that this was a narrative study with personal interviews, the final study included the eight students interviewed and myself, as I took time to report some of my own personal experiences related to resilience and motivation as well. The recruiting of participants was reasonable, given that there were about 500 high school seniors and a core that have demonstrated academic success to choose. Students were expected to be in the top 5-20% GPA range in their graduating class and to have had personal challenges that could have impacted academic success had they not been so resilient, but the final group did not all demonstrate this GPA range, due to some of their struggles earlier in high school.

However, the Grade Point Averages for the current and previous year appeared to fall within that range.

There were limitations to the study, given both the small sample size and single, suburban community that the participants live in. However, the nature of narrative research was collaborative and the small sampling and close proximity allowed me to negotiate with the participants and actively engage them in the research process (Creswell, 2013).

**Recruitment and Access**

Given a student body of almost 7,000 students in my suburban public school district, which includes a high school of 2,000 students and 500 seniors, I felt I had a more than adequate population of participants that would meet my criteria for the narrative study. Approval was
attained from the superintendent of schools, and this then allowed me to work directly with the
school guidance and adjustment counselors and educators of high school seniors, in order to
determine a small group who may meet the criteria. Students had to be a minimum of eighteen
years old, in order to be able to voluntarily participate in the research study. Once the students
had been determined, I sent out a letter of request for voluntary participation to those who
seemed to meet the general criteria of students who appeared to have been motivated to succeed
and to have resilience in overcoming adversity in their environmental background. I did not feel
the need to apply incentives, as I thought that most motivated students would be eager to share
stories of success. Creswell (2013) talks about how qualitative studies can lead to empowerment
of the participants by allowing their voices to be heard.

Recruitment occurred in three stages. First, high school guidance counselors and
educators were asked to identify high school seniors who had demonstrated resilience in
overcoming adversity in their lives and whom have been motivated to succeed academically,
despite this childhood adversity. After initial communication led to further questions by the
counselors, I asked to meet with them all to explain the research and reassure them about student
confidentiality. For me, finding the participants and establishing a rapport was seamless, since I
had access to a large pool of high school seniors and the guidance staff was eager to support
activities that can help the district improve practices for college and career success, once we
were able to meet face to face and they understood the study better. My narrative study results
should have the potential to do so. In order to determine whether the students that were chosen
by the counselors met the necessary criteria for my study, I also sent some details to the
counseling staff to indicate criteria for participation (having had to overcome types of adversity
but still been motivated for college and/or career success). As a participant myself, I felt I was
transparent throughout the data collection process. Next, students who volunteered to participate in the research were screened by email and/or phone conversations in order to explain the research process to determine whether each student was a good match for the study in that they seem to have demonstrated resilience in academic life by overcoming adversity to have met with success in school.

Ethical issues also had to be considered for this research. I needed to be transparent about how I planned to use the data I gathered and I ensured anonymity as expected. Disclosing the purpose of my study up front was part of my process for being transparent. Given some of the diverse cultural and socioeconomic differences in the student population, I needed to be able to anticipate how participants or family members would interpret the final product, and I needed to be sensitive to the different family dynamics in place. Creswell (2013) walks you through the ethical considerations to consider throughout a qualitative study.

Data Collection

In beginning the data collection, I had to first consider my role in the narrative inquiry process. For this particular study, I had planned to be both the inquirer and a participant, since I had planned to include my autobiographical narrative inquiry, as I needed to consider the relationship of my own memories and relationships (Clandinin, 2013). The participants voluntarily participated in this study, and I certainly engaged in listening to them tell their stories of their lives, as they remembered them. There was a definite need to build a relationship with each participant, as I began the data collection process (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr, (2007) discuss three commonplaces to include in narrative inquiry: temporality, which means people’s events have a past, present, and future; sociality, which means thinking of the social conditions and the relationship between inquirer and participant; and place, which means
the boundaries or sequence of place where the inquiry will take place. All of this had to be considered as I, the inquirer, planned out the data collection process.

The data collection process was very involved. Data collection includes many aspects, such as: getting the permission, conducting a good sampling strategy, determining how best to record, and being able to anticipate ethical issues (Creswell, 2013). Once permission was received from the public school district, and subsequently from the students who volunteered to participate, and in according with Northeastern University’s IRB, the data collection involved continual planning and reflective thinking on my part as the inquirer. Gaining access to the participants and beginning to establish a rapport with them was also part of the early data collection, as well as considering what field issues could occur in the data collection process (Creswell, 2013). Reflecting on each part of the data collection process was important to my success.

Once participants had been chosen, each participant was be interviewed for about 60 minutes each, with open-ended questions, in order to develop an understanding of emergent themes related to who or what helped them to be intrinsically motivated and who or what helped them to be resilient in the face of challenges to their successes, from their narrated stories. Interviews were recorded and transcribed through rev.com at a later date, and responses were then coded to determine common themes in the narrative responses. Additionally, my own story of motivation and resilience for success was included in the study and data collection.

When collecting data for a research study, I needed to first determine the steps in the process and the best format(s) for collecting data, as well as how it would be recorded and shared. An extensive amount of homework occurred before even beginning the data collection process.
Data Storage

Storage was done electronically and protected, since the researcher digitally audio recorded interviews and uploaded them to a computer that was password protected. This helped to keep the interviews confidential. The recordings were then uploaded with no student names just numbers assigned to each student, in order to have them transcribed. The electronically transcribed records were then saved on the researcher’s personal computer and password protected to ensure security of the data and the participants’ name.

In order to ensure confidentiality, the online transcribing service rev.com was utilized and pseudonyms were provided for each participant. With the movement away from paper files, there are less concerns that paper copies of research might be floating around, and, this too provided a level of security. Once the research is published, the recordings are deleted and the researcher must continue to ensure that the participant’s information remains sealed, as promised in the initial agreement to the participants.

Data Analysis

As part of data collection, students were going to be interviewed twice, and all agreed to do so, if necessary. However, since there was significant data obtained during the first round of interviews, second interviews were deemed unnecessary. In addition, anecdotal notes were taken during each interview. Interviews were transcribed as indicated above, coded twice using a manual coding process, and then they were analyzed for common themes. Any additional anecdotal data that was recorded during the interviews was also coded, analyzed and cross-validated as well. The data analysis process was labor-intensive and challenging, in order to ensure accuracy and to help to gain meaning from the interviews to support the narrative study on resilience and intrinsic motivation. Interpreting the student interview data in a meaningful
way and maintaining ethical responsibilities also added to the challenge. Narrative coding was appropriate in this qualitative study that explored both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of the participants, since I had hoped to complete a study that was more open-ended, in which I determined meaning about the problem of practice from the various stories of the individual participants (Saldana, 2013).

Once the data had been collected, analysis can occur in a number of ways. It was particularly important to consider one’s positionality when beginning the analysis process. Narrative studies are historicized in context and constructed from experiences in participant’s childhoods and the narrator of the story interprets the historical context based upon her own position in relationship to the research topic and how she views the data set (Riessman, 2002). Analysis required the interpretations of the researcher/narrator and the organization of the data into categories and perceived themes that, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) may also incorporate the use of field notes (Elbaz-luwisch, 2010). Effective analysis and interpretation, which considered the relational context of the commonplace perspectives of the participants, is a very important element of narrative inquiry. Elbaz-luwisch (2010) references the six steps of analysis as discussed by Clandinin and Connelly which begins with the participants’ descriptive perceptions and ends with the actions and interpretations of the researcher. Analysis may be constructed differently through the differing perceptions of the individual researcher.

While there are different ways to interpret data that is collected in a narrative study, most qualitative studies follow the same basic format. Creswell (2012) lists the six basic steps as: preparing and organizing data, exploring and coding data, coding for description and themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting findings, and validating the findings’ accuracy. While these steps relate to most qualitative studies, analysis of narratives may also incorporate
other approaches, since it should be persuasive, coherent, and pragmatic in the analysis approach (Zinkhan, Delorme, & Riessman, 1995).

In order to appropriately analyze the data from my participants, I utilized both In Vivo Coding and axial coding. For the initial coding, I began by utilizing In Vivo Coding. Saldana (2013) considers In Vivo Coding to be very appropriate for qualitative studies. In particular, he contends that it is appropriate for studies in which one wishes to “honor the participant’s voice”, such as I intended to do in my narrative study, in that feel I captured the stories of my participants’ stories of adversity and academic success (Saldana, 2013, p.91). In Vivo Coding was useful in ensuring that I captured what was most important in each participant’s story, by coding in a way that capture’s what is keyed into by the participant, rather than by me, the researcher (Saldana, 2013).

The second cycle of analysis utilized Axial Coding. The purpose for using Axial Coding, according to Saldana (2013), is so that I was able to reorganize the data in order to determine which codes are more dominant. Since I primarily completed interviews of my participants, with some minimal field notes, Axial Coding was appropriate for this type of data. By completing two cycles of coding, I was able to determine the emergent themes that resonated from the participant interviews and quotes that stood out from the interviews, as well ensure that all of the important themes from the data had been covered (Saldana, 2013).

In the data analysis, it was important to consider the unique aspects of the narrative study. It could be necessary to include artifacts and other relevant literature that can help detail the cultural context of the life of each participant through an interpretive lens (Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens, 2012), but this was not as relevant in my study. Re-interpreting of data is also essential in a narrative study. Since I primarily completed student interviews, these six basic
steps were applicable to my narrative study, but I also needed to ensure that I captured the essence of the narrative stories and the lived experiences of the participants as well.

**Trustworthiness**

There are a couple of safe-proofs I had to put into place, in order to ensure trustworthiness and validity of the study. One way I was able to do this was by collecting names of high school seniors who had demonstrated motivation and resilience in acquisition of academic success from the high school guidance department. Rather than spread a wide request for participants, I attempted to limit the pool to those who had already been vetted in their school environment. Since I work in the school district, it was a bit challenging to keep the study confidential, since counselors were curious if I had met with their students, but I reminded them of my need for confidentiality, and I asked the voluntary participants to sign a confidentiality agreement about the work we were completing together.

In attempting to utilize high school seniors who had already attained the legal age of consent (18), I was able to minimize concerns around maturation of the participant. Given my closeness to the topic, I had to be sure to share any potential bias I may have as well. Also, given that my current role is a district role, not a student role, my familiarity should be considered negligible. Although I visit the high school regularly, the over 2,000 students at the high school do not engage with me enough to develop a familiar relationship.

Given my role as both researcher and participant, this also helped to reinforce my trustworthiness, since I shared that I would be recording my own life experience within the narratives. Participants seemed to understand how closely I was connected to their experiences by sharing my own story. Throughout the process, continual collaboration took place to ensure that the recording and restorying were accurate depictions of the participant’s lives and the
working relationship might continue after the interviews have been completed and after the writing process (Creswell, 2012).

**Presentation of Findings**

In order to accurately present the findings of a narrative study, continual re-interpretation of emergent themes needed to occur. Goodson, Loveless, & Stephens (2012) discuss how important it is that the findings are interpreted in context and then re-interpreted while analyzing the data. While the findings of a narrative study could be useful to the researcher and the participants, they could also be useful to those who can learn from the themes analyzed and constructed. Since the findings were developed from the in-depth analysis of a small number of individuals, they may not be generalizable to a large audience, but they could be utilized for constructing knowledge and learning from the participants’ lived experiences in similar circumstances (Zinkhan, Delorme, & Riessman, 1995).

The initial presentation of findings involved a presentation of the narrative of each student in the form of core stories in response to the interview questions provided. After presenting the narratives of each participant, core themes from a review of the narratives across all participants, and in accordance with method presented the Data Analysis section were presented, inclusive of an examination of the commonalities and any district differences from across the participants. In the end, it is hoped that the findings may shed some light on those experiences and perspectives of these students that could inform educators’ (administrators and teachers) perspectives on the lives and perspectives of these students.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Having completed the IRB training previously, it was a strong reminder of the importance of ensuring protection for research participants. In my role as an assistant
superintendent of a Prek-12 public school district with over 1,300 employees and 7,000 students, I had to be extra careful to ensure that my participants didn't feel pressured to participate in my research by my position or role in the district. None appeared to be so, and all appeared eager to share their stories. Given the narrative study I had hoped to complete, utilizing high school seniors who are 18 or older, I believed this protected my population. As the leader for administration & personnel matters for staff, I do not directly instruct the students in the school district, and they did not appear feel pressured in any way to take part in the research.

My population included volunteers who demonstrated resilience toward academic outcomes, despite having suffered through adversity in their young lives. They were allowed to remain anonymous throughout the research process. I also included myself as part of the narrative study, which, I felt helped me to develop empathy in relationship to protecting my subjects. My ability to empathize helped me to engage the participants, and I also was sure only to note pseudonyms in the study, in order to encourage anonymity. All participants were apprised of the purpose and objective of the study and were assured that they could remove themselves from the study at any time. I did not feel the need to interview additional candidates, as I was able to include in the study all eight who were interviewed. I was transparent in explaining the expected outcomes, and I promised to share a copy of the study prior to publishing. This enabled me to be compliant with the IRB process.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this narrative study was to better understand what may have motivated certain students to achieve successful academic outcomes, oftentimes in the absence of environments that promoted college and career success, and to determine what may have contributed to their resilience, despite challenges in their environments that could have otherwise hindered their successful outcomes. For example, a number of these students had suffered from living in environments with either a mother or father who had developed severe drug addictions, and many even suffered the loss of a parent from suicide or a death of a sibling, as well as other traumatic experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach was an appropriate match for the overarching research questions related to student motivation and resiliency of these students. In the hope of better understanding what types of strategies, dispositions, proclivities, and/or capacities may have contributed to these students’ academic success in the face of growing up in difficult or challenging circumstances, the following three research questions guided the design of this study and analysis of data:

1. What do students who have demonstrated success despite having had to overcome adversity attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically or otherwise?

2. How do these students who have grown up in a challenging environment or have had obstacles to overcome believe their resilience has contributed to their overall success, as perceived by the student?

3. Despite having had challenges to overcome, were there specific people that supported them and helped these academically successful students overcome their personal adversity? How?
Context

The stories of eight students who were current seniors or former graduates from the same middle class suburban community high school are presented in this chapter. Their stories are shared in the order that they took the time to share them with me. All eight students were very forthcoming and willing to volunteer to tell me their individual stories. In fact, they all seemed “happy” to share their stories, as if it vindicated them. The ability to remain anonymous seemed to make them more comfortable in sharing the harsh realities that they had experienced. All had suffered from varying levels of trauma and adversity in their lives, and all were working to overcome it. Either a guidance or adjustment counselor recommended all of these student participants to me, or a teacher or a mentor at the school may have recommended them. The counselors felt they were good candidates for the study I had proposed. While I had reached out to other recommended candidates, these eight took the time to voluntarily meet with me and share their difficult and personal stories.

The criteria that had been sent out to the staff that submitted candidates indicated that participants needed to include students who planned to attend college or pursue a career after high school. The population had to include high school seniors or former graduates who have demonstrated academic success despite having had adversity to overcome in their childhoods, as identified by guidance counselors and/or educators that know them. The initial expectation indicated that students for the study had to be in the top 5-20% of their graduating class, but this specific criterion had to be modified when few participants were able to meet this criterion, due to the difficulties they had overcome to meet with their current levels of success. Despite the slight change in criterion, the students’ stories led to examples of resilience and motivation for success.
Gail

**Adversity and challenges in childhood.** When asked about her childhood, Gail indicated that she had “two great parents,” and “I couldn't say that I have had a very difficult childhood.” But then Gail went on to explain that, “My dad was an alcoholic. He's gotten help since then but it was a struggle trying to, at that point my dad had a really bad childhood so that affected him and he never really got help for it.” This impacted her ability to have friends over the house when she was young. In seventh grade she moved with her mother to her current town after her parents’ divorce. She acknowledged having challenges to overcome but felt like she had a pretty good childhood. Although she acknowledged both her father’s alcoholism and her parents’ divorce, at the onset of the interview she did not seem to view these as adversity or challenges to her success as a student.

As we spoke further, Gail indicated that she did not think that her parents divorcing had impacted her. It was not until she had moved she said that, “them getting divorced really dawned on me that that's something that could really affect people.” Gail’s parents had divorced when she was eleven, but they still talk and she doesn’t see tension in their relationship. Her parents had realized that they should not be together mostly because of how her father was acting, and her “mom's career was going off on a different path.” However, having to leave her home and move during middle school years was a struggle, as she missed her previous home and had trouble making new friends. This was a major reason for her success in school. Gail did not have a lot of friends and was a bit lonely, so she immersed herself in school, and she started to get excited over getting good grades and wanted to keep this up. Gail did acknowledge that she cried sometimes when she gets stressed and that she never really went to therapy to help her cope with the divorce, like many others did in similar circumstances. She shared, “I know how to channel
the stressful energy into something that's better.” Gail has always preferred to deal with her own stress and calm herself down and not let others know. This seemed to be working for her in overcoming adversity in her life.

**Support systems.**

*Family supports.* Gail described her parents as being very supportive of her and she described her relationship with her parents and sister as being “close.” Her family has helped her when she gets anxious about her grades and thinks they are not good enough. They tell her, “You should be proud of that. Most people don't have that.” This helped her not to get too stressed when feeling pressured to get perfect grades in school. She acknowledged that her friends have been supportive as well, but it is her strong family relationships, “that really motivates me to do well and make them even more proud.”

Along with her immediate family, Gail described a close relationship with her aunt and cousins. She was given a lot of responsibility to help care for her younger cousins beginning at the age of eight. She felt that babysitting for her younger cousins helped her to become more responsible, and this helped her in school as well, because she matured a lot quicker than some of her friends. Gail’s mother worked in Boston and Gail was home alone a lot, but she felt that it was a good thing because it helped her to become more responsible. Gail did not view this as a difficult time in her life in any way.

*Supports in school.* When asked if she had had any particular teachers or staff members that had made a difference in her academic life, Gail immediately described her guidance counselor, Mr. P.

My guidance counselor, Mr. P., he is one of the best guidance counselors. I know there's some guidance counselors, well from what I've heard from my friends, they don't really
interact as much. Every time I email Mr. P., he's always got an answer and he's always, "Okay, we can meet up." I know he's super busy because he's got so many kids and he's in charge of other things. It means a lot that he takes his time and he really gets involved. I just think he's the greatest guidance counselor ever. I'm so glad I have him. I don't know what I would be doing with my college applications.

In addition, she commented that she had sought teacher help when she needed it in school, since she had to be responsible for herself when her parents got divorced. She felt she couldn’t bother her parents for help but was comfortable getting help from her teachers. Her love of learning kept her motivated to succeed in school

**School years.**

*Elementary and middle school years.* Gail started school in public school then transferred to a small Christian school. She credits this smaller environment for boosting her academic achievement since she was doing eighth grade math in fifth grade and it gave her an “edge” when she returned to public school. When she started middle school in pubic school again, everything was easier since, “I was doing math that I had already learned and everything so it was easier.” In the town she attended elementary and middle school, she noted that the schools were underfunded and the schools were not as good as the schools she attended after she moved. She also felt that the students she went to school with were not very invested in their educations because, “There's no clubs. There was sports and everything and there was a drama club but other than that teachers weren't super involved.” Gail did not note anything too remarkable about her early school ears. As noted earlier, she did very well in her new middle school after the divorce and family move to a new town, and this was due to her not having a lot of other things but school to focus on at that time in her new life.
**High school years.** Gail felt like she was getting a lot out of her high school education. While she acknowledged things were not perfect, she valued that they listen to students at her high school. They have a student voice summit and a strong student council. When she went into high school she found there were many opportunities awaiting, and, “The teachers here I feel are really dedicated.” In particular, she found her teachers in her AP classes to be “super invested in their work and I think that really shows to the student.” She shared:

> I feel like if a teacher cares about what they're teaching you as much as you care about your own education that really helps. That really helped me to, I really want to show them that I'm improving and that I can do better and I feel like that's one of the reasons why I wanted to take an AP class in the first place. It's harder work so I knew the teachers ... It also prepares you for college but immersed in a different type of environment where the teachers are just as invested as the students.

High school provided a supportive environment to promote Gail’s academic success.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Gail was never satisfied when she got less than an “A” in school. She wanted to attend a good college and had wanted to be a doctor ever since she was a little girl. At one point she thought about being a chef, because she liked to cook, too, but being a doctor has, “always been a goal in the back of mind when I'm thinking about things.” She went on to describe how interested in the human body and Anatomy she is, as she is fascinated “how the body can heal itself.” She could picture herself as a surgeon one day. Gail was taking multiple AP courses in high school to achieve her goal of getting into a great college, even though she found it challenging. Gail was motivated to succeed in college after high school.

When asked if she were resilient, Gail described herself as dealing with stress very well. She felt she is different than others because she just doesn’t let the divorce and other things
bother her. She focused on the positive and mentioned that, “my parents still love each other. They just didn't, it just didn't work them being together all the time.” She also felt it important “to channel the stressful energy into something that's better.” While Gail did not acknowledge herself as being resilient, she presented this way in the interview.

**Arlene**

**Adversity and challenges in childhood.** Arlene commented that she did not really tell people much about her past. However, she was quite forthcoming when telling her story. She went to live with her aunt when she was eighteen months old and found out when she was about eight that her aunt had actually adopted her. Her dad was never around much, and she had no memory of her mom. Her biological sister came to live with her for a couple of years, but she had thought her aunt was her Mom, since she had gone to live with her at such a young age.

Later she found out her father was an alcoholic. She stated that, “if I ever lived with my dad, who is an alcoholic, I wouldn't have. I don't believe I would have gotten as far as I did today.” She also mentioned having two older, biological sisters, but she did not really have a relationship with them. She described her relationship with her father as if it had been tumultuous. Her father had called her up about a year ago with a painful revelation.

Last year I had just found out that my mom had committed suicide, but my whole life I thought she had passed away by cancer, and stuff. We don't have many pictures of her. I just wasn't doing ... My dad had called me, and he was really drunk. He had told me that she had killed herself, and it was my fault, and she never wanted me, or anything. Last year I found out, my grades were so good. I just feel like I overcame that. I went to therapy, and stuff.
Initially upon hearing that, Arlene blamed herself, but the therapy helped. She realized, “There wasn't anything I could do. I was only five years old when she had passed away.”

Arlene first learned about her father’s alcoholism when she was in middle school. At that time she had to get a restraining order against him because he began threatening her.

That was about sixth grade, because I didn't tell him that I had a concussion. He got super upset about that, and tried to get custody of me. Sixth grade was just kind of like a bad ...

I didn't talk to him for a year. Then in eighth grade I decided to speak with him again, because I felt bad that no one was really talking to him. We were talking for about a couple months, until he decided to call me drunk, and fight with me.

Arlene continued to file restraining orders against her father and then had a brief relationship with him for about a year, until he called her in junior year with the drunken revelation about her mother. That was very difficult year in Arlene’s life, “probably the toughest out of every year that I've gone through.”

**Support systems.**

*Family supports.* Arlene described her childhood as having been in a good household and having had good examples in her life. She was raised with her cousins, two boys and a girl, as if they were her siblings. She went on to say that her aunt had recently remarried and that her step-uncle is “the greatest thing ever,” and, “he treats me like his own daughter.” Arlene considers him to be a father figure who has also made a difference in her life. She considers her aunt to be have been very good to her as well. Arlene credits her family for helping to support her through the difficulties with her father. Her aunt had severed the relationship with her brother, Arlene’s biological father, as well, and she helped her to get through everything and be successful in school.
**Supports in school.** When asked if there were any people who had supported her in school, Arlene spoke positively about her freshman year history teacher, whom she had gotten closer to while she was a sophomore. She confided in this teacher, and the teacher told her how important it was for her to do better in school. They became very close, and the teacher continues to keep her on track, even now in her senior year. She shared, “just being in her environment helped me concentrate, and stuff. I think she was probably one of the biggest helps in school for me to get through everything, and keep up my grades, and stuff.”

**School years.**

**Elementary and middle school years.** The early years were not so bad for Arlene in school because she just thought her aunt was her mom and her uncle was her dad. She was, “living a normal life,” and “never really had a problem.” But the middle school years were more difficult. In middle school, when her father was abusive, her grades really suffered. She couldn’t pay attention in school and started getting all “F’s” on her report card. She did not really care about school at that time and just did not do her schoolwork. She began to do a little better in eighth grade while keeping away from her father, but she struggled again as she was entering high school, since some of the problems with her father geared up again. School was not a focus or a priority at the time, it seems.

**High school years.** The earlier struggles followed Arlene to high school. She couldn’t pay attention in school and began to get questioned by her teachers. As she continued through high school, she began to attend therapy, and she later severed her relationship with her father again. Junior and senior years had been very successful. By not talking to her father, she was able to focus on her education and do better in school, because she spent too much time thinking
about him before, and, “he just puts so much stress on me.” This negative relationship had impacted her life and her academics for a number of years.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Arlene did not really describe herself as resilient. She just felt that she had the comfort of knowing that what happened to her mother in her past was not her fault. She learned to block out her father’s painful accusations and figure out she was not to blame. Arlene felt that not everyone would overcome what she had gone through as well as she did. She focused on getting good grades and considered herself to be successful as a student.

College was on Arlene’s future horizon. She was beginning to apply for colleges and wanted to be a psychologist, so that maybe she would be able to help others. She described her motivation for success.

Honestly, my aunt had talked to me about it. I honestly just wanted to prove him wrong because he doesn't really think I'm going to go places either. He doesn't really know my grades at all. He's never really cared about what I do in school, so he automatically thinks I'm not doing well, and that I'm just passing every class with a D or something. I honestly just want to prove him wrong, and tell him that I can actually go places.

Arlene had to put this relationship behind her in order to succeed in school. The idea of going off to college was very motivating to Arlene, and a current Capstone project was very motivating as well, in her senior year. She was completing her project on Multiple Sclerosis, since she had helped raise so much money for this cause while growing up with and supporting her cousin who had the disease. Arlene was ready to be successful in college.
Melissa

Adversity and challenges in childhood. When asked about her childhood Melissa began her story this way:

My mom died when I was in sixth grade because of a drug overdose. First, she died in my house. It was one night before school I guess, and in the morning, my brother ... I could just hear my brother screaming. We were just all weirded out. We just thought he was upset because he missed the bus for school or something, but I woke up and my brother found her. Yeah. I obviously saw. My nana slept over that night. … It was weird to me. I just didn't believe it. I ran away for literally three hours. No one could find me.

She continued on, explaining that her father was also in jail at the time, and he did not even know the mother had died. The parents were divorced, but they had gotten back together before he went into jail. Melissa explained, “Yeah, as a kid, they would always fight and stuff, but sometimes they'd be fine. I really think it was just the drugs that got to them.” Melissa knew that her mother always seemed tired, but she did not want to really believe that her mother had a drug problem.

Melissa worries a lot about turning out like her parents. She explained that, “I feel like I have that gene in me. If I even touch anything to do with drugs, it's just going to click automatically.” Her brother is 22 and drinks sometimes, but she worries about him getting into drugs, and her fears keep her from touching drugs or alcohol herself. Instead of focusing on herself, she is often concerned about her brother’s wellbeing. He brings up his mother’s death and thinks things would be different if she were there, but he usually keeps things bottled up inside. Melissa indicated that her brother gets very angry about the past, and she is very concerned about him. The legacy of her parents lives on.
Melissa recalled a sad memory. She described a conversation she overheard on the other end of the phone. She heard her mom ask her dad to pick up a bag of dope. Her dad said, "No. The kids asked me for drinks. I want to bring them home drinks." Her mother said, "Just tell them you didn't have money." She spoke to her nana about the conversation, because it really scared her. Her mother found her crying that night, but she never told her what she knew. Her mother did not die from heroin, she said, but from the use of prescription drugs such as methadone and Klonipin. Melissa’s parents had lost custody of her and her siblings when they were young, and they fell back into drugs after the children were back in custody.

**Support systems.**

*Family supports.* Melissa was grateful for the support of her aunt and her Pop-pop, “because if it wasn't for them, I feel like I wouldn't be who I am today.” She and her sister moved in with her aunt, and her brother moved in with her Pop-pop (grandfather). Eventually, they all moved into her grandfather’s house together, including her siblings, aunt, and cousins. While she was grateful for her family, she acknowledged that it was a lot to have eleven people living in the house. She felt it was nice to have so many family members living together, but it was also annoying, because she did not get her own space, and bathrooms were a problem in the morning.

Even though there are drawbacks to Melissa’s living situation, she acknowledged a close relationship with her aunt, dating back to when she was a baby. Her aunt and grandfather are both her support systems. She shared that she wished to be a social worker someday, because she wanted to help other people who were going through things like she did. Her family supports had helped her avoid getting into further problems like her parents had.
**Supports in school.** Melissa had had a bad experience with an outside counselor. She did not feel comfortable discussing her problems with the counselor, and she also felt betrayed by the counselor’s disclosure. She recalled, “I remember when my mom's death certificate came back to how she died, and I already knew. I already knew. I just told her not to tell me because I already know, but she still told me anyway. That just really set me off.” Melissa’s betrayal led to her ending the relationship with her counselor, and she relied solely on her aunt for support until she found another support at school.

Melissa described a positive relationship with an adjustment counselor at her high school. When the counselor is available, she will talk to her, but she does not really like to discuss her problems with people at school. She reflected more about how she helped others at school, such as a special needs’ student who was scared in the hallway one day, and this led to a description of her relationship with her uncle who was special needs as well, with a diagnosis of autism. Instead of relying on others, Melissa had become a support to others in her life that she considered to be less fortunate than she was. Despite that, however, she readily shared how her counselor at school had helped her plan for college. They had discussed her attending a local school for two years to save money, and then she would transfer to a four-year state school and major in social work. While Melissa did not talk in depth about her supports at school, it appeared that she was headed in the right future direction, due to the counselor supports.

There was, however, a teacher who was there for Melissa in high school. Her second period teacher was always upbeat and motivated, and he did not judge her when she did not complete her homework. He was her favorite teacher in high school, and she credits both him and her school counselor for helping her to get the where she is today as a student.
School years.

**Elementary and middle school years.** In her early academic years, Melissa struggled in school. She had a hard time in first grade and was kept back as a result. Melissa could not read, and she attended summer school for extra help as well. At the time, she thought she was stupid for having to repeat first grade, but now she realizes that it helped her at the time. Her academic struggles continued into middle school. When her mother passed away, she stopped going to school. After she finally returned to school, she could not handle attending classes, and spent most of her time in the guidance office. Her sister was much younger, and both she and Melissa’s brother had returned much quicker to a normal routine at school. It took Melissa a couple of months to return to a normal schedule.

**High school years.** Melissa’s struggles followed her into high school. One situation resonated with her very much. In health class, they showed a video on drug addiction. At the end they listed names of local community members who had died of an overdose. Before Melissa got to class, a number of her friends tried to prevent her from seeing her mother’s name listed at the end. Melissa appeared offended and hurt by the carelessness of the teacher who showed the video in class that day. Although the teacher later apologized, Melissa couldn’t forget that day in school. She felt incredibly embarrassed at school after that event.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** As Melissa moved into her later years in high school, she began to realize the importance of getting good grades, in order to get into a good college. Despite her father’s drug problems, she credits him now for helping her to be motivated to succeed. Although he has been in and out of jail, they have a close relationship and a “bond.” He told her, “I want you to get good grades. I don't want you to be like me.” Her father helps her to stay focused on her accomplishments and is relieved when she indicates she does not want to
end up like him as well. Melissa also resides with her father now at her grandfather’s house and enjoys a close relationship with him. The fact that her father has been clean for five years is comforting to Melissa. Melissa was clear that she did not want to be like her parents. She wanted to graduate high school and get her degree in social work.

In addition, when asked why she wanted to be successful in college, she said it was because of her mother.

My mom. Why she did that. I just want to be able to show her that I can do better…… I just want them to know that just because what they did doesn't mean that ... It could help us. It could help me because it just makes me think what if they didn't do it, what would I be like? That's what I always wonder. If they weren't doing drugs and they were just normal parents, and just had their arguments up and down, how would I be? How would I act? Would I fall into that trap just because they didn't do it? That's just how I think. I just want to show them that I'm never going to do it and I'm just going to be successful.

Melissa was sad that her mother would not be there to see her graduate, and she missed her mother a lot. The adversity she had suffered in her young life led to her resilience and her motivation to live a different life than her parents. She wanted to help others to have better lives than she had had as a child.

Denise

Adversity and challenges in childhood. Denise started her story of adversity by sharing that she had always lived with her grandmother, because both of her parents had been drug addicts. Her mother had lived with them until her death when Denise was four years old. It was very hard growing up without a mother in her life. There was no talking about normal girl stuff with her grandmother, like she felt she would have been able to with her mother. Her
grandmother tried, but it just wasn’t the same. She described a generational gap between herself and her grandmother, and she acknowledged that her grandmother’s generation was a bit racist, which she found problematic. However, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) had been involved in her life as well, since her grandmother was an addict, too. She claimed that her grandmother was not abusive towards her like her parents had been, but things had not been easy.

Currently, her father is not addicted to drugs, but he still has a problem with alcohol. He is not a mean drunk, she stated, but he is not there for any of his children. Denise’s father had had two other children after her. Denise’s grandmother adopted her when her mother died. She described her father with the following:

He's not an awful dad, but he kind of sucks. He just, he's not there for me….. I've never actually looked at him as a really dad. Not saying he doesn't love me, but he doesn't know how to be a parent. He's not grown up enough. He dropped out in the eighth grade, I think, and he's not smart enough to get a good job. He works under the table, doesn't pay child support, just thinks that he can do whatever he wants and everything will be okay, and he doesn't take any responsibility for anything. He has three kids and he doesn't take any responsibility for us.

Denise does not really have a relationship with her younger half-siblings either, because she doesn’t want to be around her father.

**Support systems.**

**Family supports.** Denise’s grandmother and grandfather had taken her in at a young age. Her grandfather had died two years ago, and she did not discuss their relationship. The grandmother had pretty much paid for everything for her, as her father rarely gave any money to
help out. While she loved her grandmother, their generational differences were noted, and her grandmother’s drug addiction had also had an impact on her life. Denise appreciated that her grandmother was trying to change and continued to learn about how not to judge other people for their differences. Yet, it was hard to make friends when she was younger because her grandmother was often asleep on the couch from taking too many medications. Denise did not want to explain her family life to friends as a child.

_Supports in school._ When asked if any particular people supported her in school, Denise described a few. She described three special, female teachers in middle school, one who taught English, and another who taught science. All three teachers, she felt, had really been there for her when she struggled. They would sit and work with her and help her with her questions in school. They listened to her when she felt frustrated and she appreciated being able to talk to them and get help from all of them when she needed it. These three teachers helped her get through middle school, at a time when she wanted to give up.

While she described good, caring relationships with her teachers in high school, it was actually a woman from the teen center who stood out the most during her high school years. “Karin” really supported her during her teen years. “Karin” had always been there to talk to Denise when she visited the teen center. She even took Denise too get her driver’s permit when the time arrived. At Christmas time, “Karin” helped her grandma out by buying presents. She also helped Denise get a summer internship at the state house in Boston. The internship had been a very positive experience for Denise. Even though she felt she was too old now for the teen center, Denise still spent time there, as she liked to help out and spend time with the younger children who attended the teen center.
School years.

**Elementary and middle school years.** Denise described her early years of struggle in school. She recalled that spelling was really hard in elementary school, and that she did not really understand math at all. Things were so challenging for Denise that she just kind of gave up by middle school. She felt she would just drop out of school when she legally could, in order to get a job. It took a lot before Denise was finally diagnosed with special needs. She had been to many different schools in her early years and she had been described as lazy, until she was finally diagnosed with dyslexia. Denise was ready to give up until she entered high school.

**High school years.** Upon entering high school, Denise decided to “buckle down.” She got her first job and realized she needed to work harder in school. She still struggled with spelling, and she could not do math without a calculator or writing out all the steps. In high school, she just did not give up when she struggled, still hoping for a better life to come. She also reflected that her teachers cared about her, both her special education teachers and science teacher, and they would not let her drop out of school. This helped Denise to persevere in high school.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Denise did not have role models in her extended family. Many of her cousins had dropped out of school and had become drug addicts and/or gone to jail. She also described her grandmother’s struggles on public assistance and realized she wanted to have a better life for herself. Denise had a job at Dunkin Donuts and hated that she only made minimum wage and a little in tips. She knew that she could not have a life and a family with a job like she currently had. Many of the people Denise worked with, in her opinion, were not very motivated. They had not graduated from high school and did not want to go to college. Denise wanted more than this for her future life.
Denise felt she has been resilient as a student. She really wanted to get good grades and knew that “school is something that's going to help you later on.” She took pride in the fact that she is getting almost all A’s in school right now. Despite having been diagnosed as dyslexic after an illness and seizure from meningitis, Denise did not let her special education status hold her back. Although it had been hard for her to learn, and she had believed she was stupid when she was younger, Denise had the desire to learn and worked hard to be successful in school. Denise noted that,

I don't want to turn out like my parents. Just, people weren't mean to me but they weren't nice either, when I was younger. It's kind of like, I want to be better. I want to prove them, oh, I can do it just as well as you can or probably better. Just because I'm a little different, or I don't wear nice things like you do. I got a job, and then I kind of just paid for my own stuff. I was like, well, if you can have it, so can I. I'm just going to work ten times harder.

Denise wants to go to college to study criminal justice, because she really wants to be able to help young people learn from bad choices they may have made in their pasts.

Kathy

**Adversity and challenges in childhood.** Kathy presented as a vivacious, All-American girl. She described her childhood as “really good.” She had a close family with two parents, two sisters, and a brother. She described her childhood as “typical.” School had come somewhat easy to her, she just felt,

I don't feel like there's anything school-wise, academic-wise that I can't do if I really set my mind to it. I feel like sometimes if I get a bad grade or aren't doing so well, I know it's
because I didn't put in the effort. I know it's my fault. I know it's not because of something that happened years ago.

Kathy did not really struggle until her teen years. In high school she suffered from severe depression. By senior year, she was suicidal and was hospitalized. She missed a lot of school at the time. She couldn’t focus on her schoolwork. School became less important than getting a handle on her depression. The reason she finally got help for the depression came from confiding her suicidal thoughts to her high school boyfriend at the time. While she had been angry with her boyfriend for telling her parents about her suicidal thoughts, Kathy was very thankful that she had gotten help before it was too late. Although she hated being in the hospital and the adult outpatient group wasn’t appropriate at the time, she was able to get a handle on her depression and return to school, after she was moved into an adolescent support group.

**Support systems.**

*Family supports.* Kathy’s parents had been very supportive and encouraging all her life. They encouraged her to pursue her dreams and they have helped her all along the way, both in and out of school. They never held her back from trying things in life, even when she was struggling from depression. She credited her family for why she continued to be successful in college today. When it was hard returning to school, Kathy’s parents reminded her how good she was doing, and they pushed her to finish school, even when she wanted to give up.

*Supports in school.* If not for the support of her high school adjustment counselor, Kathy did not think she could have made the transition back to high school or finished her senior year. It was horrible when she first returned to school. She did not want to be there at all. Kathy started to meet regularly with her adjustment counselor. The counselor put a support group together at school, with a group of girls who had similar problems. This helped Kathy immensely.
That turned everything around. It was what I looked forward to at the end of the day, beginning of the day. Because you just talk to people who are going through the same thing. Even if they don't give the best advice or any advice at all, at least you knew you weren't the only one, which kind of could carry you and take you through the school days like on its own.

The high school adjustment counselor had a big impact on Kathy’s return to success at school. She also described how important exercise became, to help her battle her depression in high school, and then later as she ventured off to college.

**School years.** Kathy had little to say about her school years and any other struggles in school. She did fine in elementary school, and she did really well in both middle school and high school. She would come home right after school and get working on her homework. Her parents never had to yell at her about her schoolwork, as she was very independent about getting her work out of the way. Her first struggles in school occurred when she was hospitalized for the depression and suicidal thoughts. It was hard for her to get back into the “zone” at the time. School was not important at the time, as can be expected. Returning to school was difficult and she struggled to get back on track. She also slacked off a little later in her senior year of high school, after she got accepted into college, like many students do. Kathy has continued to do well in college as well. She continued to get good grades in college and had felt successful in her college years.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Kathy was always very motivated while growing up. She described herself as a bit competitive, always wanting to get good grades on tests. Also, she was very competitive in sports, playing many different sports throughout her school years. However, after her bout with depression, her motivation level was impacted. She still did well in
school, but she became less competitive, and more satisfied with feeling happy with how she was feeling both in and out of school. Now that she is in college, she feels she has a better balance between school and her relationships outside of school as well. Kathy is content with her current level of motivation, because it is not as school-centered.

At the same time, Kathy wished she could be more motivated and set higher aspiration for herself. She felt she could put more effort into school and could have gotten an internship in college or even studied abroad. She believed she had the capability to control where she is in life and where she was going, and she did not believe in blaming her past for where she is today. She had overcome the depression and tried to keep it at bay through exercise and relationships with her friends. Still, Kathy had plans for her future. She liked working with older people, and hoped she might work in rehabilitation for the elderly. She also wanted to be an athletic trainer. So, despite Kathy having noted that she could be more motivated, she was on a path for future career success.

Carmel

**Adversity and challenges in childhood.** Carmel’s story started like this:

If you ask my parents when things started to go south between the two of them, they'll say that it was when they were pregnant with me. My father was a drug addict who did crack cocaine and things like that. He sold drugs for some time. My mother has always been ... I've always kinda viewed her as a single mother. She continued on and explained that her father did live with them growing up, but he was gone for days at a time. He worked as an electrician for his father and could have had a “cushiony” life, if not for the drug addiction. Carmel found herself playing “mom” for him, and her parents were very “distant” from on another. Her father often fell into depression, and Carmel often
found herself worrying about him becoming suicidal. Even after her father had a “spiritual
experience as “a great Christina man” and stopped doing drugs, he continued to have problems.
Carmel even had to intervene when she witnessed him beating his girlfriend. There were two
other sisters in the household as well, one three years older than Carmel and the other six years
older. By the time Carmel came along, things were not good at home.

Soon into the interview, Carmel shared the story of abuse she suffered in her home. Most
of the time, her father was abusive towards her mother, emotionally, verbally, and physically,
but, at times, he had been abusive toward the three girls as well. She recalled her parents staying
in separate rooms when she was about nine or ten, and then they divorced when she was twelve
year’s old.

It was around the same time as the divorce that Carmel’s older sister started to date
Carmel’s best friend’s father. Carmel’s mother used to watch the best friend often, and the
friend’s father was often around and started working on Carmel’s sister’s car that needed work.
As if the divorce wasn’t enough at the time, Carmel’s sister, who was 17 at the time, began to
date the best friend’s father who was 38. The two lovers hid the relationship until Carmel’s sister
moved out of the house to live with their father. Carmel recalled how much the lying about the
relationship hurt her and other family members.

Carmel’s middle sister moved in with her father after the divorce as well. When her sister
was sixteen, she was driving on the George Washington Bridge in New York, and a driver, who
was speeding, going about 110mph in a 40mph zone, killed her. Her sister was ejected from the
vehicle, the damage to her chest was irreparable, and she was pronounced dead twelve hours
later. Carmel remembered being 13 years’ old attending her sister’s funeral. She recalled both
parents spiraling into deep depression after her sister’s death; the family was suffering from
trauma. Carmel had to be very self-sufficient at the time, she got herself off to school each day while in middle school, cooked herself dinner, and survived the approximate six months of her parents severe depression. More drugs and jail time followed for Carmel’s father shortly after the death as well.

Support systems.

Family supports. Carmel recalled her mother as being “a very strong source of support and stability, “ in contrast to her father. Yet, when her mother started dating, Carmel could not handle her mother having a boyfriend. Despite her needing the support and being closer to her mom, Carmel indicated:

She was just my mom and I didn't want her to see anybody, and I was very protective of that relationship. I chose to move out of the house into my dad's house. Her and I weren't really seeing eye to eye on the whole boyfriend situation, and then staying with my dad very regularly kind of put me ... I learned at a young age to protect myself from him. Sometimes I had to just distance myself from him… But living with him, again, I was very exposed to his antics.

Soon Carmel realized that her mother was the stable one, so she returned home, and she was able to resolve some issues with her mother. Her father was in jail again, for not paying child support. Despite her mother’s struggles with depression, with days that she couldn’t get up and go to work, Carmel credits her mother for helping her to be successful in school. Carmel’s mother wished that her children did not have to struggle as much as she had. Her mother had instilled in Carmel the value of an education. It was through her focus on being successful in school and her mother’s expectations that Carmel was able to keep “a sense of control” and continue on in a
forward motion. Her mother encouraged her to have an education and a trade that would help them finance college, and Carmel valued her mothers’ supportive advice.

**Supports in school.** It was a school adjustment counselor who helped Carmel get through some difficult years, after her many losses. Her counselor placed her in a grief group and ignored Carmel’s conversation about not going to college. The message Carmel received from school was that, “I could live my life in honor of her.” She could go to college and be successful, and that shaped her future aspirations.

Carmel’s mother also forced her to meet with a therapist regularly, shortly before her sister died, even though she resisted. Carmel was not comfortable at first sharing personal information with a stranger. But, she established a strong relationship with her, and she “sat on my bed and held my hand and cried with me the night that my sister died.” The therapist even wrote a letter of recommendation, helping Carmel get into a scholarship program for college. Carmel seemed grateful for this support from the therapist who had helped her with her diagnosis of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Carmel also credited a number of teachers for their support throughout school. Even though they did not know everything going on at home, they knew about her sister, and she felt their caring had made a big difference in her life. When she was grieving, she noted various teachers who had forced her to continue on and push through the grief. This was what she had needed at the time. She sensed a lot of compassion and understanding from her teachers, but she also acknowledged that she had been a “perfectionist” and an easy student to work with.

**School years.**

**Elementary and middle school years.** Carmel remembered really hating school at a young age. Yet, after her sister’s death, school became something to occupy her time. She said,
When my sister died it was something to keep me busy. It was something ... I hated when people laughed. I hated when people said they were going to work the next day. To me I was like, "How can the world move on? How can you guys wake up tomorrow and talk about happy things and normal things." My world was completely upside down.

Despite feeling like she “hated” school, Carmel did quite well in school and felt it was something she could be “in control” of. She felt that, “that school saved my life, because I knew that I could have turned to drinking or smoking or doing some sort of drugs or not going to school.” The elementary and middle school years were a struggle due to the secrets she was expected to keep about what was going on at home. Even into middle school, she had to cover up how her mother got hurt and had a “black and blue eye.” Carmel also hid when her father left bruises on her wrists after she confronted him about money he’d stolen from her. She described herself as “good at hiding it.”

High school years. It was hard for Carmel to talk about how well she did at school. She shared that she did very well in high school, but that, “I hate talking about it.” Even though she had always done well in school, she described herself as a “perfectionist” in high school, after her sister’s death. Carmel felt success in school was her way out of poverty and, “the path that I needed to pursue to have something more of a stable life in the future, as my mom guided me.” Although she was college bound, she also excelled in culinary arts, and she felt that the vocational schooling made her a harder working student. Due to her successes in high school, Carmel was able to obtain a full scholarship in college. She was went on to continued success, and she became the valedictorian of her college graduating class.

Resilience and motivation for success. Carmel sincerely believes that the adversity she had to overcome helped to shape her life. The “co-dependent” relationship with her father had
caused her to distance herself, in order to protect herself from more pain, and “losing my sister was a very momentous occasion.” Carmel found it “funny” that her sister had hated school, and after her death, it made Carmel value her education even more. Her sister had lived like she was “gonna die young,” never planning for the future. After losing her sister and “best friend” it made Carmel realize how unpredictable life was and how important it was that she live life to the fullest.

Carmel described herself as “intrinsically motivated to understand” in school, but she was also extrinsically motivated by getting good grades. For her, academic success and her “drive” was something she could take control of. Her success made her feel like she was in charge of her own destiny. Carmel was interested in psychology and about learning from her past. If she could, “ask the questions that were helping me understand my world and what I went through in the past better, and what I think I might encounter in the future better and things like that,” she could help others from what she learned. As her mother had wanted for her, Carmel also wanted a better life than her mother, in the end, and she was on a path to have a better life.

Chaz

Adversity and challenges in childhood. Chaz briefly shared some details of his childhood years. He decided to focus on his years from birth to nine years of age. For the most part, Chaz recalled his first five years as being “fairly normal-ish.” He then went on to describe how he lost his mother at the age of six. His first recollection of his mother’s alcoholism is described as follows:

I'll start after a memory I had when I was five where she came at the house in a drunken rage and after, it resulted in the police coming. After that, the contact with her kind of dimmed to a halt. My father I basically never knew, so that was the only person there. I
was after the age of five-ish in the care of my uncle, two aunts, and grandmother/grandfather, but grandfather wasn't really in the picture much. When asked if his mother was still alive, he said, “I believe yes, she is alive.” Yet he acknowledged that he rarely saw her, and he did not seem certain of her whereabouts. Chaz preferred not to elaborate.

Chaz really felt living with his grandparents was problematic for him. He is expected to watch his younger brother daily, and this requires him staying up late at night to catch up on schoolwork. This does not allow time for him to have a job like many other teens. When asked for specific examples of adversity in his childhood, Chaz shared that around the age of six he attended his other little brother’s funeral, and he remembered breaking his arm right before the funeral. This triggered some apathy, he noted poor health for a while, and he described himself as not being very happy at the time. It seemed, though, that Chaz was not really comfortable talking about his feelings related to his brother’s death. He also commented how much he had disliked moving again in junior year of high school. Chaz wasn’t happy about a lot of his childhood.

Support systems.

Family supports. When asked about support that he received from his family, he described his relationship with his “Big Brother” from the organization. He met this person in second grade and continued his relationship him straight through high school. The big brother was a strong presence in his life, and he was described as both a mentor and a “friend.” Chaz also mentioned he was “somewhat of a father figure.” Occasionally, Chaz meets up with his Big Brother at the movies now and they communicate regularly by phone. Notably, he mentioned that this special person has not only helped him apply for college, but he has also taken him to
visit two colleges thus far, in contrast to his family. Chaz’s considers his grandmother to be a loving person, but they are “kind of” close. He also described his relationship with his younger brother as, “He annoys me and I have to watch him, so I won't qualify that as a good relationship but I love him.” Chaz’s relationship with his “friend/mentor” appeared to be his closest family support.

**Supports in school.** Chaz was able to identify some positive supports in school. He felt a few of his teachers were “awesome” and one helped to instill a love of psychology. He also spent a lot of time visiting his adjustment counselor at school and appeared to have a positive relationship with him. While Chaz did not elaborate on this relationship, I had frequently met Chaz as he came looking for the counselor, and this is how I was able to engage him to meet with me. Chaz’s counselor had referred him to me previously, but, coincidentally, it was through my frequent run-ins with Chaz at the high school that I was able to capture his interest in this research topic. Our paths seemed to intersect at various times, leading to pleasant, brief communications on various topics.

**School years.**

**Elementary and middle school years.** During elementary school, Chaz was still in touch with his mother. She had been frequently in and out of jail, he recalled. Apathy, as self-described, set in during later elementary years, and he escaped into books to avoid the “real world.” He seemed to take pride in being a really strong reader, stronger than other students his age. Middle school started more favorably, until he was “bullied.” When asked to specify, Chaz shared that he was more neglected in middle school, due to his “eccentric personality.” He was often ignored and insulted by his peers, and this seemed to be a painful memory to Chaz. This caused Chaz to further disappear into his books.
**High school years.** Chaz did not have too much to share about his high school years. He moved in high school, which he was not pleased about, and he continued to have health issues, often feeling “crappy” and wanting to go to sleep in class. Once he started feeling better from medication, he started doing much better in his classes. He was currently enrolled in three advanced placement classes and three honors classes. Because of his health issues, his early high school grades had suffered, but now he was doing well in school. He considered himself to be successful as a student overall.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Chaz felt he was more resilient than most people who have had to experience similar levels of stress. He felt he had had a lot of incidents to overcome in his childhood, and he felt his relationship with his friend/mentor had helped him to be resilient as well. He shared that, “my resiliency in the past has helped in solidifying the desire to go into higher education.” He also considered himself to be very motivated, based upon the field that he wanted to pursue in college. Chaz wanted to learn about Artificial Intelligence (AI). He wanted to be involved in designing AI and take courses in computer science, psychology, sociology, and other similar choices. He thought that programming and web design might also be useful in AI design. Chaz had a unique career choice in mind that was motivating him for future success in college.

**Chrissy**

**Adversity and challenges in childhood.** Chrissy’s adversity started around fifth grade, according to her recollection. She stated, “You can tell when your mom's acting weird, but you don't think anything of it. Once you get older, like, of course I knew that she had a drug problem. My dad knew, but I didn't know.” Then, Chrissy described her brother’s battle with mental illness. He was bipolar. Chrissy recalled being in sixth grade, when her brother was about 23,
and he brought home his 19 year old girlfriend to live with the family. Despite the age difference, Chrissy and her brother’s became very close, “like my big sister. …She was like my best friend.”

Soon, her brother’s girlfriend had a baby. The couple moved out, due to all the fighting, but Chrissy kept up a close relationship with his girlfriend. Because of her brother’s drug addiction, the baby spent a lot of time with Chrissy’s family. Chrissy then shared a horrible memory. When she was in seventh grade, she got dismissed from school to find out that her “big sister” had been found drowned at the beach. While Chrissy did not elaborate, she did not think the girlfriend would have gone in the water alone at night, because she was afraid of the ocean. The police had never determined whatever had happened to her body. Chrissy felt badly for her brother, but he became estranged from the rest of the family, leaving Chrissy to care for his young son for weeks on end. He was often suicidal, which seemed to frighten and worry Chrissy at the same time.

Although her parents did not want the responsibility of caring for their young grandson, they got custody of the baby when Chrissy was in eighth grade. Her brother’s drug problem had escalated. The family continued to struggle, and Chrissy’s father soon lost his job. Chrissy’s schoolwork was impacted, as she worked long hours at the local Dunkin Donuts, and all her money would go toward the family needs. Mom’s drug problems continued, and she went “away” for a while, with more responsibility continually placed on Chrissy.

**Support systems.**

**Family supports.** Chrissy described her parents as being good parents. While her mother was away, Chrissy’s dad took care of all of the other children, as well as the grandson. However, Chrissy shared more about the truly supportive relationships in her life to speak of,
My grandparents on my mom's side, they're really awesome. They're always there, supportive. I would always be home with them. I wouldn't want them to know about any of it. It would just break my heart when my parents would fight so badly. I didn't care about myself. I knew I would get over it. I just block it out. But them, it really affects them. My little sister, even if she hears, if the music's loud in the car, her anxiety just gets so bad. She's terrified that something bad's going to happen. All the little siblings have really bad attention issues now. In school, they're always acting out.

Chrissy’s grandparents moved in with her family fulltime, along with an aunt who suffered from Alzheimer’s. She indicated her parents are doing better now, but life at the home, with so many people living there, can be very chaotic. Her parents sleep on the couch at night, so her grandparent’s can have the bedroom. It sounded like a challenging set of circumstances.

Chrissy’s grandmother continued to support both Chrissy and her brother who had struggled for so many years. Periodically, her brother showed up in Chrissy’s life, sometimes with a new child, but always with problems. Yet, Chrissy said, “My grandmother definitely was always there for me. She's one of the most important people in my life. I could always count on her for anything.”

**Supports in school.** Chrissy could not seem to recall any specific supports she had received in school. When asked about this, she continued to speak of her relationship with her grandmother, but then she mentioned the support of her best friend’s mother, and described her best friend’s parents “like my second parents.” Chrissy also credited her best friend for helping to motivate her to succeed. Her friend struggled academically, but the fact that she never gave up and never let others in school disrespect her made Chrissy proud of her. Chrissy felt she was a stronger person because of her friend and how she handled relationships with others in school.
School years.

Elementary and middle school years. School had been a challenge for Chrissy. Things seemed ok through elementary school, and she thought it was “fun and games. However, she was completely distracted through middle school. Her grades suffered. Even before all the problems at home, she had suffered in middle school from some “mean girls.” She did not care about school with all the chaos around her, and no one seemed to notice at school. Chrissy had little to say about her school years.

High school years. During high school, academics continued to be less than significant for Chrissy. Working and making money to help support her family became the focus. After school she worked up until ten o’clock at night, and homework was not a priority. Her grades continued to suffer, and she was told she would not graduate. Her parents were “off the wall” at home at the time, and Chrissy was like a zombie, working long hours every day. Her siblings were always looking for money from her, and she had a hard time saying “no.” Chrissy finally left school in senior year, in order to work during the day and attend night school. It took Chrissy some time before she started to succeed at night school, but she had begun to find success in school.

Resilience and motivation for success. As Chrissy started to do better at night school and find a better job, making more money, she started to become more motivated about her future. She began to save up some of her waitressing money and to set goals for her future. Chrissy was beginning to fill out applications for colleges in both Boston and New York, with a focus on fashion. She began to speak excitedly about opening her own business someday, even asking if I would write her a letter of recommendation for college. She knew it was going to be challenging and expensive, but she seemed excited about the challenges ahead.
Chrissy talked about overcoming adversity in life. Despite all of her challenges, she shared how much she cared about other people, indicating that her nephew “is definitely one of the most important people in my life. I don't know what I'd do without him.” In the past, she felt she used to push forward and work a lot of hours for her family, but recently her focus had changed. She shared, “Now, I'm pushing forward for myself. I really want to start my own life now. I feel like I've been living everyone else's life. It's time for me to start my own.” Because of her new focus on herself, Chrissy puts more effort into school, doing what she needs to do to be successful, so that she moves on with her life and be successful in a future career.

**Themes from Across the Interviewees in Relationship to the Research Questions**

In addition to presenting the stories of the eight young women and men above, the researcher undertook a thematic analysis of the transcripts from across all of the study participants to identify significant themes in relationship to each of the three research questions. These themes are presented and discussed below, drawing from the commentary and stories of the study participants.

**Research Question 1: What do students who have demonstrated success despite having had to overcome adversity attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically or otherwise?**

A thematic analysis of the transcripts in relationship to research question one resulted in the identification of three common themes as follows:

- **Wanting a better life.** Arlene, Melissa, Denise, Carmel, and Chrissy all referenced wanting a better life than what they had grown up with and/or wanting to be different than a parental model.

- **College aspirations.** Education was important for these students. All had developed
career interests, often related to their experiences, and college was the ticket to a better life.

- Self-determination/ Self-pride. These students were determined to overcome adversity and do better than others may have expected from them. Their sense of pride in their accomplishments and desire to do well in school helped them to persist when challenges arose in life.

*Wanting a better life.* Having struggled from adversity in childhood, these young adults were determined to turn out better than their parents had or than some other individuals in their lives who had set poor examples for them. They had often witnessed how use of drugs or alcohol had ruined lives and resulted in a lack of motivation, and they would not allow this to happen to themselves.

Arlene was very clear about how her father had impacted her life, especially when he told her about her mother’s suicide and told her it was all her fault. This initially led to Arlene feeling depressed, but she then realized, “There wasn't anything I could do. I was only five years old when she had passed away.” When asked what made her do well in school, she stated:

I honestly just wanted to prove him wrong because he doesn't really think I'm going to go places either. He doesn't really know my grades at all. He's never really cared about what I do in school, so he automatically thinks I'm not doing well, and that I'm just passing every class with a D or something. I honestly just want to prove him wrong, and tell him that I can actually go places.

Alcohol made Arlene’s father say horrible things to her, to the point where she had to get restraining orders against him and keep him out of her life. She did not want to be like him.
Melissa talked about her father using drugs and ending up in jail and telling her not to end up like him. She told him:

I don't want to be like you either. I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, but I don't want to be like you, and I will never be like you. I'm going to be my own person. He likes that.

He likes hearing that because he likes knowing I don't want to do anything like that. While Melissa had a good relationship with her father, his poor examples made her want so much more for her own life.

Denise’s father had made her want a better life too. She shared how her experiences with him had shaped her resolve:

If I ever have kids I don't want to be like him. He's not an awful dad, but he kind of sucks. He just, he's not there for me. He's not really so much of a dad as he is like, just a family member. I've never actually looked at him as a really dad. Not saying he doesn't love me, but he doesn't know how to be a parent. He's not grown up enough. He dropped out in the eighth grade, I think, and he's not smart enough to get a good job. He works under the table, doesn't pay child support, just thinks that he can do whatever he wants and everything will be okay, and he doesn't take any responsibility for anything. He has three kids and he doesn't take any responsibility for us. Sometimes he'll give my grandmother money, but my grandma's paid for everything.

Even though Denise struggled in school and was diagnosed with dyslexia, she was determined to do well in school and go to college to have a better life than her father.

Similarly, Carmel shared her desire for a better life than had been modeled for her.

Carmel was very clear that she was not going to mess up like her father:
I think I always grasped onto that that I saw my dad mess up. He had a great education provided to him that he completely messed up. He had a great opportunity provided to him that he could have just swooped in and taken over a business, and he messed that up, so I think, for me, I heard my whole life education is the key, education is the key, coupled with the fact that it gave me that sense of control.

Watching her sister die young and not put effort into her school or future aspirations before she died also made Carmel want more for her future. She stated:

Then obviously losing my sister was a very momentous occasion. It's something that still affects my life very deeply to this day on a daily basis. Her passing away gave me ...

Funny enough, she actually hated school. She had the biggest dreams in the world for herself, but she did not like school and she as just the poster child for ADD. When she passed away, something about realizing how unpredictable life is and how finite it is, it can be taken away from us tomorrow, it made me say, "I need to live my life to the fullest. She lived like she was gonna die young.

Carmel’s family circumstances had a profound impact on her plans for her own future.

Finally, Chrissy, too, wanted something more out of life. Both her parents are out of work and there are a lot of children, a grandchild, and other adults living in her home. She described working long hours at Dunkin Donuts and being tired all of the time. Her parents did not have any money, so she often had to help buy things for her younger siblings and nephew. It was not an easy life. Once she got a better job waitressing and had better money, she decided to start saving up money for college, because, like the others, she felt this would be her way to a better life as well.
College aspirations. Despite having a lot of challenges to overcome, all of these young adults were focused on a college education. Even though some had struggled in school prior to high school, as they dealt with family suicides or deaths, drug and alcohol abuse, and all sorts of trauma, all had managed to improve their grades and choose a field of study in college. Thinking ahead to college and a better life as a result was a powerful motivator for these students.

All eight students described their college aspirations and had mapped out a path for success. Gail talked about her success as a student throughout her school years. She was working on her college applications, hoping for a scholarship, and looking forward to a career in pre-med. Arlene wanted to be a psychologist. The idea of going off to college to learn to help others was very motivating to Arlene, and she felt she could make a difference with a degree in psychology. Melissa was clear about going to college, but she wanted to save money by first attending a two-year college. Melissa knew she wanted to be a social worker, because she wanted to help children who had been taken away from their families. Denise talked about wanting to go into the Air Force, but her early high school grades had impacted her grades, and she did not do as well on the test as she would have liked. She wanted to try to go to college for criminal justice and would probably attend community college to get her grades up before attending a four-year college. After struggling with severe depression and threatening suicide in high school, Kathy refocused her energy and was attending college. She hoped to work in a rehab with elderly clients and possible be a personal trainer as well, since exercising had really helped her with her depression. Carmel had recently graduated from college as class valedictorian. Her strong grades landed her a full scholarship to college. Her mother had instilled in her the need to have a trade and to attend college, and Carmel had achieved a degree in psychology. Chaz, the only male interviewed had a very unique college goal. He was interested in computer programming and
hoping to work in the field of artificial intelligence, which was motivating him to apply for college at the time. Finally, Chrissy viewed attending college as her second chance, since she had dropped out of high school and then returned to evening school. She was motivated for a career in fashion design and was hoping to attend school in New York.

All eight participants were determined to go to college. Some had been excellent students, describing school as an “escape” while others had struggled academically, until they realized the importance of good grades and a college degree. College aspirations for all were sending them on a path to future success.

**Self-determination/ self-pride.** Self-determination seemed very evident in relationship to the success of all these students. In most cases, they had no role models who had achieved college and career success, but they were determined to succeed and have better lives than what they had experienced in their early years, better lives than their parents. This does not happen without self-determination.

For Melissa, she was determined not to end up on drugs like her family members. She said, “I don't want to go through that. I feel like I have that gene in me. If I even touch anything to do with drugs, it's just going to click automatically. I don't want that to happen.” This also made her determined to be be a social worker because, “I just don't want to see anyone go through that. It's not fun. It wasn't. Sometimes we never had food in our house because they wanted just to get drugs.” Denise’s determination came from the poor modeling of her extended family. She stated,

“…not a lot of people from my family actually continued school or actually wanted to do something. A lot of my cousins are in jail, and a lot of them are becoming drug addicts now. It's just, I don't want to live like that, and seeing the way that my grandma struggles,
she gets help from all the government funds like that, but I don't want to have to rely to live on check to check.”

Carmel described her father’s lack of ambition that lead to her self-determination, 

He worked for his father. His father opened up an electrical business from the ground up, and my father could have had a very cushiony life. Yeah, but he really messed that one up for himself. He wouldn't go to work for days at a time, wouldn't come home for days at a time. Refinanced the house and spent all the money on drugs and things like that.

Knowing that her father had quit college after one year and thrown away a lucrative career had made Carmel determined to both finish college and have a successful career. Chrissy’s determination seemed to come from watching her parents’ lack of motivation. She shared,

My parents have been sleeping on the couch every day, because their room is for my mom's parents. The spare room is for my aunt. I got a new job. I definitely needed that.

Dunkin' Donuts was probably one of the reasons I was, because when I started going to night school, I was working the morning shift. I would do 4:30 to 2 every day. I was just exhausted.

That’s when Chrissy got a new job and started saving money and looking at schools in Boston and New York. The Self-determination Theory aligns closely with the self-determination exhibited by these individuals and all the students interviewed.

From the answers the participants shared, their individual self-pride emanated from the descriptions of their various accomplishments. When asked if she considered herself a good student, for example, Gail said, “I think I am because I'm in National Honor Society. That's not something to push aside. I feel confident, I applied to colleges, some pretty prestigious colleges and I think, I feel like I will get in.” Kathy commented, “ I would say I'm pretty successful and
I'm pretty happy with where I'm at.” Carmel, who had excelled her entire high school and college career, shared, “I hate talking about it. I swear my family to secrecy when I get my grades in. Yes, I would consider myself a successful student. I've always been very ... A perfectionist, that's the word I want, when it comes to my work.” You could sense she was proud that she had achieved so much more than her parents, but she was very modest about her success. All of the students interviewed considered their selves to be successful academically and all seemed very proud of what they had accomplished thus far.

**Research question 2: How do these students who have grown up in a challenging environment or have had obstacles to overcome believe their resilience has contributed to their overall success, as perceived by the student?**

A Thematic analysis related to question 2 resulted in the following three themes:

- **Responsibility at young ages.** In addition to other challenges in their young lives, Gail, Melissa, Candace, Chaz, and Chrissy all described having to be responsible either for taking care of themselves and/or having to care for younger siblings or family members and this helped them develop resilience.

- **Grit and resilience.** All of these young adults had significant challenges to overcome at young ages, but their “gritty” resolve had made these students more resilient in school, which led to future success.

- **Positive attitudes.** All eight participants had positive attitudes in relationship to their pasts and futures. Having a positive attitude seemed to promote resilience which led to overall success.
Responsibility at young ages. Most of these young adults either had to be self-sufficient, from being raised in households of addiction or abuse, and/or they were often expected to care for other siblings at home. This came across continuously in the stories being shared.

The students came across as very self-sufficient and none appeared angry or upset about having so much responsibility at a young age. Gail’s father was an alcoholic and her parents divorced when she was young. Her sister was in college when she was heading to high school, and her mother worked in the city, so she was left alone a lot. She also felt caring for her younger cousins had made her more responsible as well. Melissa was in sixth grade and at home when her brother found her mother dead from an overdose. Her father was in jail at the time and unable to provide support. She and her sister went to live with an extended family and had a lot of responsibility too. Denise’s mother died when she was four and her father did not bother with her at all. While her grandmother had adopted her, she had prescription drug problems as well, and Denise had to take care of herself and could not invite friends to the house as a result. Carmel’s mother went into a deep depression after losing her daughter. When her mother did not return to work, Carmel recalled not being able to pay for cable and other bills. She shared:

My mother was also in a very deep depression, and I got myself up, got myself on the bus, got myself off the bus, came home, made myself dinner, probably for about six months. I just was very ... It was me. It was just me.

Like others, Chaz and Chrissy had to take care of younger siblings, and Chrissy even cared for her nephew who lived with them. Chaz felt that caring for his younger brother so much takes away from schoolwork and studying. Chrissy’s nephew lost his mother and had a bi-polar father (Chrissy’s brother), and she seemed to have raised him, as well as helping out her younger
siblings financially. Having so much responsibility led to resilience, which helped these students to succeed academically.

**Grit and Resilience.** Angela Duckworth (2016) describes grit as “passion and perseverance” and as being “about holding the same top-level goal for a very long time.” Duckworth (2016) also indicates that, “grit, talent, and all other psychological traits relevant to success in life are influenced by genes and also by experience.” (Kindle Locations 1219). As she describes grit in her book, these young adults presented as very gritty. For this group of individuals, their “grit” may not have been influenced, as much by genes, but it most certainly seems to have been influenced by their experiences of adversity. This grittiness seems to have helped them all become resilient in relationship to academic success.

This same resilience or grit is what seems to be exemplified by these eight young individuals. They all had such trauma in their young lives, but they still persevered and worked to succeed and overcome the multiple examples of adversity they had worked through in their young lives. Despite the drug addiction she was exposed to by her father, the loss of her sister, the relationship she observed her 17 sister have with her best friend’s much older father, and living through her mother’s depression, Carmel persevered and focused on not only going to college, but getting a full scholarship and graduating as valedictorian. Chrissy had no financial support and even had to use her own money to help buy things for her siblings and nephew, but she still stayed focused on getting a better job and saving her money to go to college. Chaz told me, “I would consider myself a motivated student more so because of the field that I want to pursue rather than anything else.” He was captivated by Artificial Intelligence, and, despite his family circumstances, his goal was to go to college for computer science and learn how to design
Artificial Intelligence. This same resilience helped all of these students to meet the academic challenges to succeed in high school and get into college.

**Positive attitudes.** The positive attitudes exhibited by these young people helped me to understand why they were able to develop resilience and meet with success. Arlene told me she did not like to tell people about her life, yet she was very forthcoming about her circumstances. Her alcoholic father had been so abusive to her, but she focused on the positive influences in her life. She spoke proudly about her relationship with her new stepfather her aunt had married, saying, “My aunt was very, very good. She had actually gotten remarried last year. Her husband, so my step uncle is the greatest thing ever. He's so great. He treats me like his own daughter.” While all of those interviewed had positive attitudes, Kathy shared her positive thinking:

> I feel like for me at least, if there's something school-wise that I need to do or should do, I should be able to get it done and I can get it done if I put my mind to it regardless of what happened in the past. Because you move on. You learn from it. Each day you get stronger.

Kathy also talked about how important exercise had been in her life. When she was depressed in high school, exercise had been a “release” for the depression, and this continued throughout college. Exercise helped Kathy develop the positive attitude that seemed to enhance her resilience.

Likewise, Carmel had experienced so much trauma and adversity in her life, including divorce, physical abuse of her mother, death of her sixteen-year old sister, life in a state of depression, etc., but she could not have been more positive about the opportunities she had achieved from her high academic achievement. After her sister’s death, she felt she should live her life in honor of her, and she went on to earn scholarships and travel abroad in college, and
she could not have been more grateful for these opportunities. All of the young adults had very positive attitudes, despite the trauma they had had to overcome.

There seems to be a strong connection between the positive attitudes exhibited and the development of resilience. All of these young adults presented with positive attitudes, despite the difficult circumstances that could have led to the development of negative outlooks.

**Research Question 3: Despite having had challenges to overcome, were there specific people that supported them and helped these academically successful students overcome their personal adversity? How?**

A thematic analysis in response to question 3 resulted in the following three themes:

- **Family supports.** While much of the adversity faced by these students was a result of family problems with drugs or alcohol or other types of abuse, all of these young adults had received family support from either one or both parents or another family member who took care of them and raised them when parents could not.

- **School supports.** Most of the participants noted specific teachers or school counselors either in middle or high school who had listened to them or pushed them to succeed in school when they were struggling.

- **Other supports.** Most participants, including Arlene, Melissa, Denise, Candace, Chaz, and Chrissy described relationships with other people, such as a therapist, family friend, or mentor of some sort who had provided support in addition to or in place of a family or school support.

**Family supports.** Despite the fact that a number of these individuals had an absence of maternal and/ or paternal supports in their young lives, most of them had some family supports that seemed to have mitigated the negative impact of the maternal or paternal influence. For
example, Arlene had an abusive father and later found out that her mother had committed suicide. However, her aunt had adopted Arlene at the age of 18 months, and her aunt and adopted family had made a difference in her young life. When asked about her family support, Arlene was clear about her family support:

My aunt, just because she obviously had to go through everything with me. Just her and my dad don't get along at all. They really don't talk or anything. She had helped me get over everything, and tell me that he's just being stupid drunk. She helped me basically be successful in school.

Arlene did not know she had been adopted for a long time. She just remembered growing up with her aunt, her husband, and her three kids, and living in a nice house, and she felt very supported by her adopted family.

Almost all of the individuals had a family support that made a difference. Gail spoke positively about her family, despite the divorce and her father’s alcoholism. In her mind, they have been very supportive:

My parents are really supportive of me. My dad always tells me, all the time, how proud he is of me and how far I've come. My mom, same thing. And my sister. Everybody's like, we're all really close. Even if I don't live with my dad or anything. They're like, they really help me, too.

Even though she had to move and start a new life without her parents together, their support had helped her meet with success.

Family supports, whether in the form of one parent, a grandparent, or another family member who had taken them in, made a significant difference in the lives of these young people.
For some, however, school or other supports had as much or more of an impact on success, particularly in the absence of strong family supports.

**School supports.** In many of the stories shared, it was clear how important support from school had been for many of these students. For some, the support in school had been extremely significant. For Kathy, it was an adjustment counselor who had made such a difference. When Kathy was extremely depressed and suicidal in high school, her adjustment counselor helped her get through each day at school. Not only did they meet each day, but also she put together a support group with girls dealing with similar concerns. This turned everything around for Kathy.

Carmel also described how important the support at school had been. She noted that her guidance counselors, principal, and teachers were aware of her grief at the loss of her sister and they kept pushing her to go to school when she did not want to each day. Gail had to be very independent with schoolwork, since she was often alone at home after school, but she described her teachers as “very dedicated” and she felt she gotten help from them when she needed it.

Arlene remembered how her history teacher had made a difference in her life. It was this teacher that made her realize how important her grades were for college, and she was there for Arlene when she needed to talk about her problems. Denise described the importance of her relationship she had with her school counselor. She said, “If there's something wrong, just upset, and she has an available time, I'll talk to her about it.” Many of these students depended upon these supports in school to help them achieve success.

**Other supports.** For some of these students, there were no strong examples of family or school supports that had help them overcome the challenges they faced in their young lives. Chaz described the difference his Big Brother had made in his life. He described his relationship with his big brother this way, “I kind of had a mentor and more than that, a friend to go along with as
I was growing up which was fairly good. He was somewhat of a fatherly figure.” His big brother had even helped him with his college applications. For Chrissy, it was her best friend and parents that had made a difference in her difficult life. Her friend was her role model and the parents had always been there for her. While Carmel had other support systems, it was her therapist who stood out in her mind. Carmel’s therapist had also lost a sibling and had worked with her after her sister’s death for years. Their relationship grew so close that Carmel described her as her “mentor” who had written a letter of recommendation for a competitive scholarship program. These other supports were very important as these students navigated their early years in life.

Like the others who had outside support systems that made a difference, Denise talked about the difference a director from the local teen center had made in her life. She said:

She's just always there to talk to you. She actually helped me to get my permit, she brought me to get my permit, and stuff like that. She's always helped my grandma with Christmas and stuff, and she's just such a nice lady.

Denise had had good relationships with teachers at school, but it was the director from the teen center that had truly made a difference. For Melissa, it was the relationship with the one friend she trusted that made a difference. She stated, “My friend, that one friend, only understands. She's like, "I'm not going to look at you any differently. It wasn't your fault.” This had made a difference when Melissa was struggling to overcome her past adversity. These supports, exclusive of family and school, for some, had a significant impact on the success of these students.

Summary

Each student had unique differences to share about their personal struggles in life. Yet, each had shared stories of adversity that had negatively impacted their lives and, in some cases,
had propelled them onto paths that negatively impacted the ability to succeed in school. Some veered off their path to success significantly, until they were able to refocus, with the help of supports at home, or in school, or from outside supports, and then turn the path around to return on a path to college and career success. At the same time, the common themes that emerged seemed significant, in that the students interviewed shared some common characteristics and experiences that seemed to have impacted their lives in a positive way, despite the difficulties experienced in their early years.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

Revisiting the Problem

There seems to be an increasing concern by teachers that some of today’s students are not graduating with the coping skills necessary to succeed in college or a career. Educators often struggle to find out what motivates these students for college and career success. In addition, resilience of some of their students can be lacking, and resilience seems to be necessary for students to be able to persevere and succeed in college, career, or life. Not all students have environments that set high expectations for student success or help them to learn to persevere when faced with adversity or challenges that can impact success. This brings back the research problem of practice in this research study which was to determine what college-going, academically successful students growing up in challenging, unsupportive family and/or cultural contexts attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically. If educators can learn what it is that helps these students dealing with adversity to develop resilience and motivation for college and career, this may help them in their work with other students facing similar adversity in their lives.

Eight students volunteered to participate in this research study, seven female and one male. All of the volunteers had been recommended to me by a counselor or educator who knew them well and felt they would be a good match for the study, based upon the adversity they had had to overcome in their lives and upon their ability to continue to persevere and be motivated for future college success. Six of these students had minimal or no parental support, with various levels of drug and alcoholism, in addition to other challenges, which resulted in a lack of parental support to help them succeed academically. Two of these students had supportive families but
also dealt with significant adversity that could have impacted the ability to succeed, such as family alcoholism or severe depression.

In this qualitative narrative study, the stories of these eight individuals and how they overcame adversity and remained motivated to succeed in school are captured here. The research study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What do students who have demonstrated success despite having had to overcome adversity attribute to their motivation, persistence, and capacity to succeed academically or otherwise?

2. How do these students who have grown up in a challenging environment or have had obstacles to overcome believe their resilience has contributed to their overall success, as perceived by the student?

3. Despite having had challenges to overcome, were there specific people that supported them and helped these academically successful students overcome their personal adversity? How?

**Discussion of Major Findings**

Having closely reviewed and analyzed the stories of these eight participants and coded them for common themes that were detailed in Chapter IV, there were some themes that emerged more frequently that may be able to help educators better understand the needs of students who have struggled from significant adversity while growing up. The findings from this study may help educators better understand why some students who struggle still persist academically, despite significant challenges, in order for them to be realize how importance it is to identify these students and help them to develop resilience and stay motivated for academic success.
Self-determined to pursue a better life. A common theme identified across the eight participants was that these children, all from homes with adversity, were determined to prove someone wrong related to their individual success. Most of these students had been told by a parent that they wouldn’t amount to anything and this left them with a desire to prove the family member that was putting them down wrong. This was true of Arlene, who said of her father, “I honestly just want to prove him wrong, and tell him that I can actually go places.” Melissa went so far as to tell her father, I don’t want to be like you either. I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, but I don’t want to be like you, and I will never be like you. I’m going to be my own person.” Many also indicated that this desire to prove someone wrong strongly influenced their individual self-determination and self-pride related to their desires to succeed in life.

For these students, rather than being discouraged by the disparaging comments and lack of parental support to succeed, these participants persisted in the face of these negative circumstances. Carmel spoke of her father dropping out of college and throwing away an opportunity to work in his father’s lucrative business. While this bothered her, it made her even more determined to work hard in school and get a college degree. Like Carmel, the determination of all these students resonated in their statements about wanting to prove a parent wrong. While one would think that the negative influences would be discouraging, in most cases, these children did not want the negative parental influence to “win.”

For these students, having poor modeling and lack of support to succeed actually had the opposite effect on these students. In these cases, many of the students knew they were pretty much on their own, if they wanted a better life, and this made them determined to succeed on their own, since there was really no one to fall back on, should they need financial support or
otherwise. These students had basic issues and needs to fulfill, and they were motivated by future aspirations of having better lives than their parents.

**Positive attitude and resilience.** What this researcher couldn’t help but notice when listening to the various stories of adversity and perseverance was how these student participants exhibited such positive attitudes; despite the trauma many had suffered in their early lives. While they told stories of alcohol and drug addicted parents, neglect, divorce, death of siblings, suicide of parents, and more, all seemed to have put the adversity behind them and all seemed to have used it to propel them forward. Chaz lost a little brother, and Carmel lost her sister to a car accident at sixteen. Arlene and Melissa lost their mothers to suicide at young ages. Many of the students were surrounded by drug and alcohol and drug addiction, and some of these abusive situations. Despite these horrible events, they did not let these circumstances hold them back or use the adversity as an excuse to fail in life. Instead, they exemplified positive attitudes about who they had become and where they were heading in their future aspirations.

A positive attitude in the face of adversity seems to benefit these students and promote their resilience. The positive attitude exhibited by these students seems to have helped them to persevere when faced with the many difficult experiences that occurred at young ages. A positive attitude seemed to be related to the development of resilience as well. Not only did each not give up when facing adversity and setbacks in their individual lives that could have led to failure, they each found something motivating to them in relationship to college and career aspirations.

The positive attitudes of these students seemed to have enhanced their individual resilience, helping them to overcome adversity to achieve success. In fact, in many cases the lack of motivation exhibited by many other family members who may have quit school or succumbed to drug addiction or otherwise became a motivating factor to their own individual success. In
these cases, the individual challenges allowed them to become more resilient. The intense failings of other role models that they may have lived with and observed often made them more resilient and focus more thought and energy into what they might want to do differently as a result. They continued to persevere and remain positive when faced with continual challenges. While the futures of these individuals have yet to be fully determined, the positive attitudes exhibited seem to be setting them off on paths to success in college and career opportunities.

Other non-family supports. Something else that seems to have significantly contributed to these students’ resiliency and motivation to be academically successful was the other support systems that may have helped to offset the negative impact of a family member or members who had failed to provide the physical and/or emotional supports typically provided by other parents. In some cases, a grandparent had replaced the parental influence that was lacking in the daily influence for the participant as a child. In other cases, no family member was identified as a support system, but instead an outside influence had replaced the missing family support. For example, Chaz described a positive relationship with his “Big Brother” and Denise described a relationship with a woman from the teen center who had even helped her with college applications. Other people could make up for the lack of parenting provided by a mother or father or both, and often this made a huge impact in future success.

Sometimes, a school counselor or therapist whose job it was to work with and help the student made the ultimate difference, by providing support in and/or out of school, in order to help the student navigate and overcome the adversity that faced them in their daily lives. The interactions with these supportive adults in and out of school had a huge impact in the lives of these students in relationship to their individual success stories.
While many of the students were impacted by not having supportive parental relationships in their young lives, whether it was from having parents with addictions or from losing a parent to drugs or suicide like Arlene and Melissa, other supportive people often made a difference to these students. It is important to note that each of the individuals who did not have strong parental models referenced another person or other people that had made a positive impact in their lives.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

Two theories supported this research study, Self-Determination Theory and Resilience Theory.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-Determination Theory seems to be clearly evident in the actions and responses of these young adults. Deci and Ryan (2008) described Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as, “an empirically based theory of human motivation, development, and wellness.” In Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman (1981), it is suggested related to SDT that, “intrinsically motivated behaviors are involved with the basic human need for being competent and self-determining.” They also stated that, “People need to feel like causal agents, they need to feel competent and effective, and they engage in a variety of activities to that end.” (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981) All of these students demonstrated self-determination in relationship to school and career aspirations. Despite the lack of role models in their lives who had attended college, they were determined to go to college and have better lives than most of their parents had provided for them.

Deci and Ryan (2008) explain self-determination theory as follows:

Self-determination theory (SDT) addresses such basic issues as personality development, self-regulation, universal psychological needs, life goals and aspirations, energy and
vitality, non-conscious processes, the relations of culture to motivation, and the impact of social environments on motivation, affect, behavior, and well-being.

In some cases, these children were forced to ensure that their basic, personal physical needs were met through self-determination, since they couldn’t rely on others to provide for them. In many cases, they also had to ensure that they were psychologically supported, since they had been impacted by an inability of a family member’s ability to provide emotional support as well.

With its focus on autonomous motivation, which is made up of intrinsic motivation and the type of extrinsic motivation that helps people feel a sense of self, SDT can explain the student motivation to succeed and find their places in life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Despite the traumatic experiences that all eight participants had encountered they all appeared to have been intrinsically motivated to succeed and break the pattern that had been established in their young lives. Some had struggled in school in earlier grades, but they had intrinsic motivation related to wanting to attend college and all had career goals that they were motivated by as well. Self-determination Theory supports the thinking and actions of these young adults.

In addition, most of these students had extrinsic motivators as well, in the people who had helped them to succeed. For example, Chaz described his Big Brother as being a mentor who helped him apply for colleges, “He's driven me to two currently, and he is the one that gifted me the Princeton Review college book as well as informed me of a lot of the processes of college that I didn't know about before.” Candace talked about her therapist as helping motivate her as well, “She was my mentor that wrote me a letter of recommendation to get into the scholarship program that put me through college.” These extrinsic motivations were important, in particular, since most of these students did not have parents or other family who had attended
college, and SDT supports the importance of extrinsic motivation, along with the intrinsic motivation exhibited by the students.

**Resilience theory.** Emmy Werner (2012) developed her concept of Resilience Theory to describe how students who have experienced trauma can overcome and succeed in life. Children who have experienced significant trauma were at a significant risk for future mental health and other medical problems. At the same time they could develop protective factors when there was a strong bond between a primary caregiver and supportive teachers and peers. These students had demonstrated resilience in their individual lives after having experienced adversity and trauma at young ages. However, each could describe a positive relationship with a grandparent, an aunt, one parent, and/or a supportive person outside of the home who had significantly impacted each one of them in a positive way. These positive relationships seemed to have enhanced the ability of these individuals to be resilient in academic areas, in order to pursue a college education.

Werner and Smith (1992) detailed a long-term study of resilient children into adulthood. Like the participants in my study, the children followed had had at least one positive primary caretaker that they had bonded with and all had found emotional supports outside of the family, such as a teacher or a friend. The students in this study all had described a relationship with a primary caregiver and also referenced relationships with teachers, therapists, friends, and others who had made a positive impact on their lives. These positive influences certainly helped them develop resilience and cope with some of the trauma they had experienced in early years.

While students in this study have demonstrated resilience up to this point in their lives, most have not started college yet. However, like the children in many of Werner’s studies, they did present as high risk, in relationship to the various challenges each had been exposed to. Werner (1989) considered resiliency to be “successful adaptation following exposure to stressful
life events.” Resilience Theory certainly seems to speak to the resilience and motivation of this study’s participants.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review**

Much of the literature regarding student resilience and motivation connected directly to the findings of this research study.

**Self-determination for a better life.** These students exhibited self-determination and motivation in relationship to going to college and having a better life than their parents. Ryan and Deci (2000) discuss the Self-Determination Theory as it relates to intrinsic motivation and how this fosters social development and well-being. They define intrinsic motivation as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn.” (Ryan & Deci, 2000) These students were intrinsically motivated by the desire to succeed in life and in school.

Deci and Ryan (2008) also explain that SDT is focused on the long-term goals that individuals set for themselves related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as motivation to fulfill basic psychological needs. Like SDT describes, these students studied here seem to be intrinsically motivated to fulfill long-term goals, coupled with their basic motivation of just wanting to have a better life, which is a more simplistic need to fulfill. SDT focuses on the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and how these needs get satisfied leads to the level of wellness of the individual. (Ryan & Deci, 2015) These students have been able to fulfill their own needs, in the absence of supports sometimes, demonstrating a healthy wellbeing and the concepts of SDT.

A great deal of research has indicated how much intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is related to student success, and Self-Determination Theory supports motivation as driving student
aspiration. Teachers have been shown to be able to help extrinsically motivate students by effective scheduling, varying the schedule and extending time before giving approval to build student perseverance, and by structuring of the classroom environment, using things like contingencies and approval or disapproval, for example. (Madsen, 2003) When teachers have academically engaging classrooms, with a balance of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, this can lead to student competence and success (Bowman, 2011). Teachers can play an important role in helping to develop the self-determination and motivation of their students, and this seemed to be true for many of the students interviewed as well. The students of this study often spoke of teachers or counselors helping them to stay motivated and improve their grades in order to go to college.

Positive attitudes and resilience. People that are resilient exhibit positive attitudes, and these eight students exhibited positive attitudes when they shared their stories. They fit the criteria for resilience as developed by Werner, and resilience as seen in the literature in the form of grit and a growth mindset, as well as classic resilience theory.

Grit. Duckworth has completed a great deal of research on the concept of “grit,” closely related to the concept of resiliency. As Duckworth (2016) presents in a story about Pete Carroll, coach of the Seahawks, Carroll describes grit as:

The mindset that they’re always going to succeed, that they’ve got something to prove. They’re resilient; they’re not going to let setbacks hold them back. They’re not going to be deterred, you know, by challenges and hurdles and things. . . . It’s that attitude—we really refer to it as grit. (Kindle Locations 3490).

This “grit” or resilience in relationship to athletes reminds this researcher of the attitudes of the students in this study. Even when things got challenging, all of these students persevered and
worked to overcome the hurdles in their lives. Duckworth et al. (2015) indicated that grit is just as important as talent in relationship to accomplishments, and this seemed to be true for many of these students who had not always been strong students, one even overcoming a learning disability.

**Growth mindset.** As detailed by Dweck (2010, 2012), these resilient students demonstrated growth mindsets as well. Often these students had struggled academically, but they did not give up when they had setbacks, like students with fixed mindsets tend to do (Dweck, 2010). More importantly, teachers can be instrumental in fostering a growth mindset within their students, by having the appropriate levels of praise and encouragement in the classroom setting (Dweck, 2010). Yeager and Dweck (2012) talk about how important a growth mindset is in developing resilience and how important it is for teachers to work with students to develop their resilience to prepare them for adversity that may come their way. Developing the mindsets to understand that one can overcome challenges in life helps students to become more resilient over time (Yeager & Dweck, 2010).

**Resilience.** Much of Werner’s research related to the Resilience Theory helped this researcher to understand the way these students approached challenges and why they were able to overcome adversity when others sometimes cannot overcome similar adversity. In his research, Werner (1984) noticed that some children were able to develop with stable, healthy personalities and demonstrate resilience, despite having grown up in homes that were challenging. Werner (1984) also noted “Resilient children tend to have temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from family members as well as strangers.” Harvey (2007) adds, “Positive attitudes that promote resiliency include encouraging oneself to try, being determined to persevere until success is attained, applying a problem-solving approach to
difficult situations, and fostering feelings of hardiness.” Likewise, Harvey (2007) points out the important role that teachers play in fostering resilience through a supportive school environment.

While much of Werner’s (2012) research relates to children who suffered adversity related to war, the common theme is that these children experienced trauma, much like the students interviewed, and that teachers and other caregivers can make a difference, and school settings can provide early interventions to help foster the resilience needed by children suffering from trauma.

**Non-family supports.** All of the research related to both resilience and motivation emphasize the importance of caregivers and supportive adults outside the family. While some of these students had a supportive caregiver, it was often someone outside of the home that helped them to develop resilience and be motivated for college and career success. In MacMillan (1994) it is discussed that resilient children tend to have had at least one caregiver who provided attention and support. When there is not a primary caregiver, resilient children are able to find substitute caregivers to replace the parental need (MacMillan, 1994).

As noted earlier, supports outside the home can be as important, if not even more important than supports at home. For resilient children, the consistency of school can provide significant support, and teachers may play a major role in helping their students to be successful, when they take the time to develop personal relationships with their students (MacMillan, 1994). Resilience can be fostered and developed through the caring and authentic relationships between teachers and students (Prince-Embury, 2008), just as we have learned from the stories of these resilient students. Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2004) talk about how important it is for other supports, such as social workers, to help children develop the protective factors necessary to enhance resilience and succeed in college and career opportunities (Greene, Galambos, & Lee,
2004). The research related to supports other than family members and resilience in children correlates closely with the success stories of these eight students.

**Summary.** The literature supports the findings from this study. Self-Determination Theory focuses on both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and the fulfillment of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, in order to promote optimal functioning and personal wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These eight students evidenced significant self-determination, and the literature supports their abilities to meet with future success is solidly established, provided they continue to remain motivated to succeed in life.

The literature on Grit, Resilience, and Growth Mindset also coincide with the findings of this study. As noted in the literature, “gritty” students tend to have passion and perseverance and present as highly motivated to succeed, in the face of difficulties (Duckworth, 2016). A Growth Mindset is also closely related to grit and resilience, and Dweck’s work on this topic also supports the emergent themes and findings related to these students. Dweck (2010) discusses the need for students to develop a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset, in order to meet with academic success, particularly when faced with challenges. A growth mindset has been shown to be even more critical than innate intelligence, and these students all demonstrated a growth mindset in relationship to academic success. The literature on the Resilience Theory, as developed by Werner (1984, 1992), also supports and explains why these students were able to overcome the many challenges they faced in life.

**Limitations of the Study**

Given the small scope of this study, there were limitations that were evident from the sampling. First, this study was completed in a working class, suburban community that has become more diverse than surrounding suburban districts and also did not take place in an inner
city community where additional challenges may exist. Because it is somewhat unique for the area, the specific challenges that these students overcame may not be quite the same in other school districts with different socioeconomics and less cultural diversity. In addition to the unique cultural diversity in this suburban community, there is also a varied socioeconomic influence, depending upon which section of the town a school is located in. Since this is not as similar to other school districts, the results may not be as applicable in some of the surrounding school districts.

Additionally, the small amount of participants in the study poses limitations as well. Not only was it limited to eight participants, in order to allow for meaningful sharing of individual stories, seven of these participants were female, creating a limited sampling of male input. This was not by design, but actually based upon the majority of students recommended to me being female, as opposed to male, as well as those that volunteered to participate out of the applicant pool. Given the small number of participants, as well as the gender implications, this would be a limitation to the results as well.

Finally, an additional limitation relates to the short-term status of this current study. While there were consistent themes that emerged from the stories of these eight participants, the short-term duration of this study may limit the scope and sequence. These students presented as ones that have been able to overcome childhood adversity, and, in some cases parental abandonment, but they have still been able to meet with academic success, with all leaning toward, minimally, a four-year college degree. However, without a long-term, longitudinal study, one cannot determine whether or not they will succeed in college and a future career opportunity, limiting this study as a result.
Significance of the Study

This narrative research study is significant to educators, support staff, and administrators in my school district who may want to provide additional support to the lives of their students, supporting their resilience and motivation, in order to promote high expectations and encourage their persistence into college and careers. Educators often struggle to motivate students and help them succeed in school, with the competing influences in their environments, but finding out what interests students and makes them want to succeed in school has proven to make a difference for these students. Too often, colleges share concerns that students are not coming to college prepared for the social-emotional needs related to persevering through academic struggles and the demands of more independent learning. It is helpful to show students how they can be successful through persistence and be taught how to work through problems and continue to persevere when things get challenging. These students demonstrated the ability to do so, given some additional support from family, school, or outside influences, or a combination of two or more of these influences.

Research supports the importance, in particular, of teacher influence upon students. Kusurkar, Croiset, and Cate (2011) share twelve tips for increasing intrinsic motivation of students through Self-Determination Theory and autonomy-supportive teaching. Locke and Harris (2011) discuss using multicultural literature to increase student motivation to learn, which is applicable to schools with students of many cultures, in particular. Madsen (2003) talks about how just changing the schedule in the classroom can work to enhance learning and extrinsically motivate students, for example, by varying the length of time between teacher reinforcement, to increase appropriate student behavior, which thus can enable them to learn more effectively. Simmons and Page (2010) talk about the impact of allowing students a voice in their own
learning and encouraging peer grading and portfolio learning in increasing active participation. The list goes on and on. If teachers want to learn better ways to engage and motivate their students, there are multiple studies that prove the effectiveness and provide simple strategies to do so. Certainly, all teachers can benefit from learning better ways to motivate students for academic success in school and beyond.

**Implications and Recommendations**

From my personal experiences working in a middle class, suburban community, as well as from the findings of this study, I have developed some recommendations that are applicable to the my own public school system, other schools, and community supports.

**Developing awareness of student challenges and needs.** First of all, it is important that educators are aware of the challenges that some of their students may face on a daily basis and help to foster the resilience they may need to persevere when faced with such adversity, in order to meet with academic success. These students demonstrated resilience and motivation for success, but not all students faced with similar adversity tend to do so. It is also true that supports provided by friends and clinicians outside of school can be just as important as those provided at school. This really suggest that schools might benefit from getting to better know and understand the needs of the individual students, to ensure that the proper supports are in place both in school and outside of school. Additionally, administrators need to provide the necessary supports and training for staff, so that they understand the significance of their roles as educators. In order to provide these supports appropriately, there is often a financial impact on the school budget, and ensuring the appropriate type and number of staff needed to support students are in place can often be the biggest challenge.
Also, it is important that teachers learn strategies for motivating students and they need to find out what things motivate their students intrinsically. This can be challenging, when public school educators already struggle to fit in common core standards and diverse learning needs of individual general and special education students in the classroom. Yet, many of these students, myself included, became interested in going to college because someone believed they could do it and, in some cases, even showed them the way. This led to most finding out what interested them and picking a major to focus on in college. For a number of these students, they wanted to become psychologists or social workers, so that they could help children or adults who had struggled from adversity, and give back in a similar way as had been done for them. While it is a lot of work for schools and educators, sometimes that is the only opportunity for students to realize their own potential and become motivated to succeed after high school.

In recent years, public school systems, including mine, have seen a marked increase in safety concerns related to students suffering from social-emotional problems and/or mental illness, which can lead to physical or verbal assaults on others, or even advanced depression and attempted suicide. This is why it is so important for educators, support staff, and administrators to get to know their individual students and their needs, as well as work to foster resilience, throughout the PreK-12 school programs. One way to begin this work is to establish trauma sensitive schools through a train-the-trainer model (Trauma-Sensitive Schools, 2017). Last school year, I brought in one of the authors of books on Trauma Sensitive Schools to speak to the staff about the importance of seeing the individual student and understanding what challenges they may have in their daily lives. He discussed little strategies educators could do each day to better get to know and help their students, one as simple as greeting them at the door each day to read/help their moods, to other strategies that are more complex in nature (Trauma-Sensitive
Schools, 2017). We have continued to work on student social-emotional needs these past two school years, but we have yet to implement the train-the-trainer model for developing school-wide Trauma Sensitive Schools. A full implementation of adopting a plan for Trauma Sensitive Schools district-wide would be beneficial both to my school district and other school districts dealing with similar student concerns.

**Partnering with community supports.** Working with community outreach programs is another way to more broadly support the needs of the students outside of school. Recently, we have been closely partnering with our local police department to work on grants that support students in relationship to drug awareness/ opioid addictions, which are becoming more prevalent with middle and high school students, many of whom may be struggling with social-emotional challenges as well, which can lead to drug addiction. These partnerships have been very useful in the school community and need to be continued and expanded. Additionally, it can be useful to partner with local mental health facilities and invite them to work with students during school hours, when applicable. While the schools provide some support from adjustment counselors, some of the individual therapy needs of students cannot be met each day, given the high counselor/student ratio, and reaching out to these supports in the community can be very useful.

It is important that schools and communities realize that the adversity that many students face, which can lead to significant challenges for many, is a larger problem than schools can tackle alone. We have our students for a short 6-7 hours a day for 180 days a year, and there is often a lot of unstructured time that students face outside of school, which is why school-community partnerships are so important in promoting student success.
**Role of school administration.** Public school administrators need to ensure that the educators they oversee have the training necessary to meet the ever-changing needs of the student population they work with. While the social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum is not currently mandated, it needs to be embedded into daily instruction, in order to properly support the diverse learning needs of the student population. Many students, like those interviewed, present with significant adversity and trauma that can impact their ability to learn successfully. While educators may think it is not their job to deal with the SEL needs of students as they attempt to teach content, without addressing these needs academic learning can be significantly and negatively impacted, and students may not meet with college and career success without these supports in place. School and district administrators need to identify effective training to help educators meet the SEL needs of students and set expectations that this must be embedded into the daily instruction of students.

In Massachusetts, where this researcher lives and works, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has developed some helpful resources for use in supporting the SEL needs of student populations. This instruction from MA DESE is grounded on the premise that there are five core competencies: Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness, Relationship skills, and Responsible decision-making. It also incorporates four instructional approaches: free standing lessons, general teaching practices, integration of academic curriculum, and guidance to administrators and school leaders on how to facilitate SEL as a school-wide initiative. While this instruction is currently not mandated, school administration has an obligation to put expectations in place and provide the proper training necessary to ensure that educators do address the SEL needs of their students in their daily instructional practices. (Curriculum and Instruction, 2017).
Implications. These eight students were similar in that all eight had suffered from significant adversity in their young lives, and all had also been able to develop resilience and be motivated to meet with academic success and pursue a college career. Yet, there must be many more students in the school system that have suffered from similar challenges and have yet to be identified or to have demonstrated similar success in school. How many students like these are facing similar adversity and do not have the resilience and motivation to be successful? How can schools identify these types of students and do more to provide appropriate supports and foster resilience of students? While it is noteworthy that these students have been able to overcome challenges and seek college and career success, there are many others who do not. Schools and communities need to do more to identify all of these students at early ages and implement programs that may increase the ability to develop resilience and increase motivation for successful college and career outcomes for all students. Understanding what it is that has fostered resilience and increased student motivation in these students and applying similar approaches to other high-risk students may meet with similar results as demonstrated on these students’ stories.

Future Studies

While this study revealed some helpful information related to student resiliency and motivation for college and career success, there are future studies related to this topic that may enhance the understanding of what motivates certain students and makes them resilient related to college and career success.

Long-term study. First of all, at this point in these students’ career paths, they seem to have demonstrated success in high school and some in college. Yet, by following them over a five, ten, and fifteen-year study, this would help determine whether or not these students do, in
fact, meet with future success. Do they remain resilient and motivated to meet with success in college and a future career? A longitudinal study of this type would provide meaningful data to determine the long-term impact of the supports and individual resilience and motivation. Hearing the participant stories at five-year intervals and long-term, would provide meaningful data that could enhance understanding of how educators can help students develop resilience and remain motivated to succeed, despite the adversity and challenges that they had to overcome.

**Early identification and program development.** Another potential future study would involve school administrators putting into place a mechanism to determine which students in the school system are faced with similar adversity. Do school administrators and educators know which students are facing these types of challenges? If so, what percent of these students are meeting with academic success? Once these students are accurately identified, are there programs that schools can put into place to foster resilience from PreK-grade 12 and increase student motivation? It is likely that there are many students like the ones studied who have similar adversity in their young lives, but who are not meeting with similar success, either because they have not been properly identified, or because they may not have the appropriate supports in place in school or within the community. If administrators can develop a way to identify students early in their academic careers and put in place the appropriate supports needed, more students may reach similar levels of success in school.

**Studying other successful school district programs.** An additional study that would expand upon this current work would involve researching other schools or districts that have already demonstrated success in supporting the social emotional needs of students such as these participants. Are there schools or districts that have been able to demonstrate success in meeting the needs of students with similar circumstances? If so, what have they done to increase student
resilience and help motivate them to attain college and career success despite challenges in their childhoods? It is likely that there are schools and/or school districts already in existence that have demonstrated the ability to meet the social-emotional needs of many students who have suffered trauma or adversity related to parental drug or alcohol abuse, parental suicide or abuse, personal depression, and other trauma, and still met with college and career success. If school districts such as this do exist, then observing and learning what their staff are doing to meet with this student success would certainly enhance this study of student resilience and motivation and likely provide information that can be replicated by other school districts as well.

Throughout various parts of the United States exist over 65 Big Picture Schools that successfully graduate up to 96% of their students into post-secondary institutions. School districts could benefit from researching and modeling some of the practices employed in these learning environments to help more students achieve college and career success. In Big Picture Learning Schools, “students would be assessed on exhibitions and demonstrations of achievement, on motivation, and on the habits of mind, hand, and heart – reflecting the real world evaluations and assessments that all of us face in our everyday lives.” Public school districts can replicate the methods utilized in these types of schools, in order to help meet the diverse learning needs that students present within the learning environment. Big Picture Schools may offer insight into how best to meet the SEL and overall needs of students to enable them to meet with college and career success. (Big Picture Learning, 2017).

These are just a few, potential future studies that could very much enhance the research begun in this current study.
Personal Reflection

The following section shares a little of my personal story, with limited details, and it may partially explain the rationale for why I chose this topic. It seems that a lot of our public school students come to school each day dealing with a lot of adversity. However, some of us manage to persevere and even excel. What is that makes certain people resilient and motivated to succeed when others in similar circumstances may fail? I hope some of the findings in this study may have shed light on some of the reasons this occurs and is applicable to the necessary work of educators in helping students to meet with college and career success.

Adversity and obstacles in childhood. Unlike the stories of the students detailed above, sharing this story is more difficult, since there is no way to contain this story with a pseudonym. However, I will attempt to keep the details limited to the specific areas without elaborating, in order to keep some semblance of privacy.

This researcher grew up with parents that would be considered a bit older at the time for the generation. Unlike their siblings and peers who had married and had children in their late teens and twenties, they had married while already in their early to late thirties, and they had three children, completing their family at the ages, respectively, of 40 and 45. I am the youngest of three siblings, a brother who is five years older and a sister who is three years older.

I was very introverted as a child. I felt more comfortable diving into books than interacting with adults, but I had also been told that children were “to be seen and not heard” when adults came to visit. Both parents had grown up during the Depression, but my father had been very poor, having lost his father very young, and having had his leg had run over by an ice cream truck, which left him with physical handicaps and much lost time in school, which then led him to drop out from high school. This also left him somewhat jaded from his past
experiences in life, and we children often “walked on eggshells” around him. He worked many
hours to support the family and took pride in providing a home for his family. I did not see him
much, but when he was home, life could be tumultuous, with a lot of screaming and abusive
language. Dad was an alcoholic. I strove to be “perfect” to avoid antagonizing my father. This
worked for a long time.

In addition to my caustic home environment, I was diagnosed at a young age with Graves
Disease. I had an overactive thyroid, which is not too unusual, but my bulging eyes and inability
to gain weight left me a constant target of bullying. I was an awkward looking child and
everyone seemed to notice. I spent a lot of time at the doctor’s office in my early years, until the
disease went into remission for a while in my teen years. While I had friends, I grew incredibly
insecure from all the teasing. I often forget specific details from my childhood years, as some
memories are difficult for me to recall.

School years.

Elementary and middle school years. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Boston
forced busing initiative had an impact on my schooling. I recall having to leave my beloved
elementary school after first grade to be relocated arbitrarily to another school, and my siblings
were bounced to other schools as well. Many parents were upset, and many of my white
neighborhood friends left to attend private school. Other families relocated to suburban
communities to avoid the changes. My family stayed in public school for financial reasons. This
was the first time that I got to meet black students, and we all had to learn about the differences
in our cultures. I was one of the few white students in the school. I exceled academically, but my
bulging eyes and emaciated body left me a constant target for daily attacks.
Middle school I would describe as the worst years of my life. None of my neighborhood friends attended school with me. While I tried to get along with everyone and I had some friends, my physical “awkwardness” was more pronounced, and I stood out even more. I was physically immature and still had hugely protruding eyes and got made fun of on a daily basis by both boys and girls alike. Books became even more of an escape for me, and I continued to score off the charts in daily and standardized testing.

**High school years.** When I was ready to head off to Boston Latin Public School, my mother decided that I was attending a Catholic high school; since my sister had been beat up at the public high school she attended. While I now attended school with many of my local neighborhood friends, my years in public education left this transition a challenge as well. Most of the girls were friends, and I knew no one in the school. I also was still incredibly shy and awkward. It took some time to adjust, but I eventually managed somewhat well socially and also managed to learn the Catholic school ways, graduating number two and class Salutatorian from high school and getting accepted to some top schools in the area.

**The impact of Additional Supports.**

**Family.** My mother was always loving and supportive, but she was not very educated and held menial jobs. She was very dependent upon my father for financial and physical support. He made all of the decisions in the family, which may have been more common at that time and place. Often, my mother would help out and volunteer or substitute as a lunch lady at school. While I liked having her in the building, I would often run crying to her when being picked on at school, and this did not help prevent future bullying in any way. While my mother did not encourage me to set college and career goals for my future, she did the best she could at the time. When I decided I wanted to go to college, my father told me I did not need to. He felt he had
done well by his family without an education. I did not feel close to my father, as I was a little fearful of him, even though I was considered his “favorite.”

**Teachers.** I attended the Boston Public Schools during forced busing, when students were integrated by busing them to school outside their neighborhoods. These were not easy times for the Boston Public Schools or the students, but despite the problems at the time, I was fortunate to have a number of hardworking dedicated teachers who saw my potential and helped me to excel in school.

In particular, I credit my eighth grade science teacher for inspiring me to pursue a career in education. He was a great teacher who strove to connect with his inner city students and help them succeed. I excelled in school and was rewarded for my success, along with some other high-achieving peers. I loved learning from him and my success in school in his and all my classes helped me to feel better about myself, even though socially I struggled. I attended a large school and there were not a lot of supports in the school, but I always felt that my teachers applauded my accomplishments in my K-8 years in school. I credit these early experiences in school, and in particular my eighth grade science teacher, for motivating me to want to attend college and be who I am today.

**Resilience and motivation for success.** Like some of the other students detailed here, I worked hard to succeed in school because school was my way out. I did not know what I wanted to be, but I was motivated to do well in school and go to college. I knew I wanted something better than my parents’ life, but school and books were also something I could control and be successful at. Books allowed me to enter worlds I was not familiar with, where I could pretend to be something I was not. When things were difficult at home, I could escape to faraway places. I was in control of my academic life and my success at school, despite the difficulties I
experienced at school.

When I look back at the early memories of some of the difficult times in my early years, I also credit these years for helping me to become resilient and helping to shape who I am today. While I would never want to relive these years, as they were often unpleasant, learning to deal with and overcome the challenges I was faced with at a young age forced me to develop coping strategies. I learned to stand on my own two feet, so that I could handle future challenges with much success. I learned not to give up and to persevere when life threw curve balls my way.

**Summary.** While I have only shared part of my story, much of what I learned about the student participants is applicable to my story. Adversity in my early years, like these students, strengthened my resolve and made me resilient and able to persevere, but it also made me motivated to succeed and self-determined to have a better life. As noted earlier, in absence of specific support to go to college and succeed in school, some students learn to rely on themselves and determine their own destinies. Personally, I can relate to the negative parental influence that some of these students experienced and it’s positive effect on my self-determination. Having grown up with a father who had suffered physical ailments and, as a result, quit high school, I was not expected to attend college. In fact, when I was planning to apply for college, my father even told me, “What do you think you’re better than the rest of us?” He retired from his job with the MBTA in Boston that year and provided no support, financial or otherwise, to help me attend Boston College. I did not know how I was going to afford college, but I did not let the discouragement stand in my way.

Like many of these students, I was determined to succeed, despite my negative fatherly influence. However, despite limited supports for many of us, most of us noted a specific teacher, such as my eighth grade teacher, or another type of mentor, who made a difference by helping
each of us begin to believe in ourselves and believe we could succeed in our future college and career choices. I pursued this study with the hope of informing educators of the kinds of challenges many students face but also informing how educators might be able to help their students develop resilience and motivation. In the end, I feel that educators should be able to have a great impact on the lives of those students facing such adversity in their lives by taking the time to get to know them, connect with them, and support the development of their self-esteem and resiliency, so that they may persist and overcome such challenges toward a successful life.
References


By FireflySixtySeven [<a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0">CC BY-SA4.0</a>],<a href="http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMaslowsHierarchyOfNeeds.svg">via Wikimedia Commons</a>


doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.06.004


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_resilience#Grit


*Journal of Psychology, 108*(1), 59.


doi:10.1177/1052562911408098


doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1016/j.paid.2010.10.029


doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1016/j.paid.2009.06.002


doi:10.1037/0022-0663.95.4.667


doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.79


Psychology; Dedicated to Furthering Research and Promoting Good Practice, 9(4), 306-312. doi:10.1080/17439760.2014.898320


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Part I: Introductory Question Objectives (5-7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions, review and sign IRB protocol and form for tape recording.

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified by your academic team as someone who is a student who has demonstrated academic success despite having had adversity to overcome in order to meet with success. This research project focuses on student academic success with a focus on the resilience and motivation that has contributed to your success. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into what successful students feel helped contributed to their resilience and motivation for academic success, so that teachers may ultimately learn from their individual experiences and success stories.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I will need to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. A transcription program such as rev.com will be used to transcribe the audio tapes, but a pseudonym will be used to label the tapes. I will be the only one with access to the transcripts and information, and the tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me (provide the form). Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm (allow time to review form). Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form? I would also like to audiotape this interview and have a consent form related to this as well (provide form).

We have planned this interview to last no longer than 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to move forward to the next question, in order to complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Introduction to Interview
Researcher Background
As we have discussed in previous communication, my name is Susan Kustka, Assistant Superintendent for Weymouth Public Schools, and I am currently completing my dissertation for my Doctorate of Education at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. I have been a teacher for 15 years and an administrator for over seven years. As part of my narrative study, I plan to also share my story about what helped me to develop resilience and become motivated for academic success.
1. Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

2. Do you feel your family environment or other environmental circumstances may have impacted your success in any way? How?

3. Have you experienced adversity (provide examples if necessary) or obstacles in your childhood that may have shaped who you are today? Explain.

4. Do you feel you are resilient as a student, or able to have overcome adversity despite having been exposed to high risk or trauma as a child? In what ways?

5. Do you consider yourself to be a successful student today? Why or why not?

6. Please describe your experiences in school. Can you think of any specific challenges you may have experienced in school: elementary, middle, or high school?

7. Can you recall if any particular people or experiences may have helped you to develop resilience in relationship to success in school? If so, please share.

8. Do you consider yourself to be motivated as a student? What would you say were the most significant factors that led you to be motivated to succeed in school?