

Seeing Strengths in a Rural School: Educators' Conceptions of Individual and Environmental Resilience Factors

Brenda McMahon,

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Abstract

This qualitative study of educators' understandings of resilience contributes to ongoing rural school research that examines educators' beliefs about, and attitudes toward, rural students whom are at-risk and factors that impact rural school success. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in one rural Florida school that was reported as failing. The respondents identified individual students who they deemed resilient as well as character traits they deemed to be factors in building resilience. The principal had the experiential knowledge of rural and urban settings as well as skills required to build communities designed to increase resilience and improve student success. However, obstacles at the district and site levels meant that although individual examples of resilience were evident in this school, they were not actualized at systemic levels. The study also raises questions about conceptions of resilience related to students' exodus from their rural communities.

Keywords: *Resilience, Risk, Rural Schools*

Introduction

This study contributes to ongoing rural school research that examines educators' beliefs about, and attitudes toward, rural students who are at-risk (Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007; Marrs, Hemmert, & Jansen, 2007) and the factors that impact on rural school success (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) claim that North American schools have historically struggled with and been shaped by contradictory goals to the extent that "factors like conformity, competition, knowledge transmission, and responsiveness to economic mandates coexist with commitment to democratic principles of diversity, inclusiveness, innovation, and personal development" (p. 322). The scales have tipped toward the former and a focus on standardization with increased emphasis on testing and assessment drive school reform initiatives. Accompanied by a public display of school report cards,

this thrust shapes visions of the purposes, policies, and practices of education while the achievement gap between White and Black, rural, urban, and suburban students still exists. One way to broaden the dialogue about school success beyond the narrow confines of test results is by examining resilience in schools. Since resilience is generally associated with overcoming risk, identifying resilience building factors and processes is consistent with social justice mandates to enact deliberative interventions to create “better educational and economic outcomes for marginalized children” (Furman, 2003, p. 5). This discussion is framed by an understanding of how risk management and resilience have been co-opted by neoliberal discourses to the extent that risk is understood as existing within students and their families (McMahon, 2011) and is configured as something to be feared and avoided by school leaders (Perry, 2006). Neoliberal paradigms conceptualize resilience in terms of individual qualities enacted in order to overcome risk and as a mechanism for producing outcomes that reinforce hegemonic structures (Kaplan, 2006; McMahon, 2006). An earlier qualitative study (McMahon, 2011) provided an alternative way of understanding risk in a rural, Title 1 school that throughout its existence was designated as a failing school (Florida Department of Education, 2009). Using semi-structured interview data gathered from faculty in this school, this paper questions notions of resilience and seeks to understand and interpret the educators' conceptions of and experiences with resilience. The major questions guiding this research were: how do educators in a rural failing school in the United States conceptualize resilience as pertaining primarily to students and secondarily to educators? Specifically, how do they understand resilience as characteristic of individuals and/or as existing in relationships between and among students and faculty? What do they identify as school, district and state policies and practices that facilitate and/or inhibit resilience building?

US Educational Policy Context

Building on the 1965 federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the first iteration of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law in 2002 and revisions have followed. A number of educational researchers and scholars (as examples: Anyon & Greene, 2007; Apple, 2001; Hursh, 2007; Ravitch, Taylor, 2006) critique the neoliberal underpinnings and their incumbent policy dictates including overt claims that these reforms are designed to increase educational equity. Anyon and Greene (2007) argue that in reality, these policies work against equity. Apple (2001) maintains that the hegemony that

supports neoliberalism includes interests groups who benefit financially from these policies. In addition, pathologizing students and communities who fail to achieve on these standardized measures negates the need for a comprehensive understanding and examination of the complex of social, economic and educational changes that would be needed to truly enable all children to achieve their fullest potential in education and in life. Whether NCLB and similar reforms emphasizing high-stakes exams and accountability were actually designed to increase fairness and equality can be questioned. Hursh (2007) reports;

some neoliberal and neoconservative organizations have stated that their real goal is to use testing and accountability to portray public schools as failing and to push for privatizing education...[and it] is becoming more, not less, unequal, with a higher drop-out rate for students of color and students living in poverty (p. 501).

He argues that:

NLCB, like other recent education policies promoting standardized testing, accountability, competition, school choice, and privatization, reflect the rise and dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative policy discourses over social democratic policy discourses. Furthermore, neoliberals, who range from those who endorse the rationale of competition and accountability without appreciating the larger shift in societal discourses to those who aim to remove government from any responsibility for social welfare, argue that increased globalization gives us no alternative to focusing on increasing efficiency through testing, accountability, and choice.

(p. 495)

Specifically, “NCLB stands in the place of policies like job creation and significant raises in the minimum wage which—although considerably more expensive than standardized testing—would significantly decrease poverty in the United States” (Anyon & Greene, 2007, p. 157). Rather than reducing poverty, this policy “creates profits for private business. Schools that fail to raise test scores, for example, give way ultimately to vouchers in the market model, but first to a variety of expensive, pre-packaged curricula, testing, and tutoring programs” (Anyon & Greene, 2007, p. 160).

Additionally, Taylor questions whether or not it is even possible to achieve the goals articulated by NCLB given the racial realities and White privilege in the United States. Using almost exclusively data

from large scale tests to calculate annual yearly progress (AYP) further pathologizes already marginalized schools to the extent that “[f]ailure to meet AYP triggers a series of escalating and increasingly intrusive sanctions, and has generated fear of sanctions, especially in predominately minority schools that start well below the proficiency of predominately White schools serving middle and upper-middle class families” (Taylor, 2006, p. 71). More insidious is the fact that “NCLB centralizes minority, not majority, test results as the primary root of the achievement gap...What goes unnamed, and unchallenged, are the dominant culture’s myriad advantages” (Taylor, 2006, p. 79). Furthermore, standardized tests, Ravitch (2014) contends, “are cultural products, not scientific instruments...may have questions that are poorly worded, may have two right answers or no right answer...reflect socioeconomic status, family income, and family education...[and] do not close achievement gaps” (p. 162). These issues were evident in Florida during the 2009-2010 academic year when this research was conducted. Based on initial inaccurate Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) data analysis acknowledged by NCS Pearson, school districts made decisions about allocation of funds and even, as was the case in the school in this study, removal of administrators. Even when the company claimed to have corrected the assessments, “after a preliminary review of the data, superintendents from five of the largest school districts in the state, which are also some of the largest school districts in the USA, questioned their accuracy” (Acker-Hocevar, Cruz-Janzen, & Wilson, 2012, p. 301).

These policies are framed by neoliberal beliefs that if individuals fail, or are at-risk, it is as a result of their own faulty decision-making (Hursh, 2007). They are also informed by images of individuals who overcome racism and poverty so that resilience is configured as an inherent facet of ‘rugged individualism.’ Moreover, much of the educational discourse about risk and resilience in the United States focuses on urban schools. Finley’s (1994) observation still holds true: “the rural poverty rate is high and many areas suffer economically, writers have observed that *rural communities persist*” (p. 2). The US Department of Education (2010) reports that 80% of schools in rural districts made AYP. At the same time only 57% of schools with high poverty and 54% of schools with high concentrations of minority students achieved AYP. “Students from low-income families, minority students, and students from urban areas were more likely to attend schools identified for improvement than were other

students” (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 85). Concurrently, only 12% of rural students attended schools identified for improvement in 2006-2007. There are fewer students attending rural schools relative to urban and suburban schools in the United States. However, perhaps the apparent lack of focus on high poverty, visible minority students in rural schools is related not only to numbers of students, but also to how schools and communities are conceptualized. In the United States, and other jurisdictions, urban is coded language for poor and African American. Consequently, educational research and policy aimed at rectifying inequities for minoritized students tends to be focused on urban communities.

While some rural communities do in fact persist, “the positive concepts of resilience and protection are less familiar to rural educators and to policy makers than the negative concept of risk” (Finley, 1994, p. 1). Initiatives such as the UK Transitions movement (Hopkins, 2008) designed to build resilient, sustainable communities do not exist on a macro-level in the United States. These locally developed green movements could be instrumental in resolving the tensions that Corbett (2009b) identifies as created by formal educational institutions designed to encourage students to leave their rural communities. Envisioning schools as resilience-building environments within resilience-building communities may provide mechanisms for reconfiguring pedagogical approaches to balance standard-based and place-based knowledge (Corbett, 2009b), and redefining meanings of social and academic success.

A resilience framework that examines individual and environmental factors and processes provides an alternative to data derived from ongoing testing as a mechanism for understanding the leadership, policies, and practices within schools. Even though resilience is a contested term (Kaplan, 2006; McMahon, 2006), it is a suitable concept because it is generally used to denote an ability to overcome adversity or risk and can be applied to individuals and/or organizations. Focusing on individuals, researchers, and theorists (Elias, Parker & Rosenblatt, 2006; Goldstein & Brooks, 2006; Kaplan, 2006; McMahon, 2007) distinguish between resilience factors as internal attributes of individuals, and external or environmental processes, as existing in relationships between and among individuals. Although not mutually exclusive, both perspectives conceive of resilience as mechanisms that lead to positive

outcomes for people in adverse circumstances. This distinction between factors and processes may be the result of an understanding that environmental aspects of resilience need to be operationalized in order for resilience to be realized. However, since the same may be said of individual resilience factors, it may be more fitting to refer to intrapersonal and interpersonal resilience dynamics or individual and environmental resilience factors.

Resilience – A Contested Term

Research identifies factors common to students at risk that do not automatically entail that any particular student is at risk. Academic risk may be associated with individual, family, community, and school characteristics. Although “any student may begin to perform marginally or poorly, regardless of factors related to economics, gender, ethnicity, or family structure” (Barr & Parrett, 2001, p. 25), the effect of these factors increase exponentially as more of them are present. Risk factors for students include living in poverty, membership in a minority race or ethnic group, first language acquisition other than English, single-parent family composition, parents’ low level of education, and rural geographic status (Barr & Parrett, 2001). The presence of multiple factors increases the probability of risk. For example, Peart and Campbell (1999) point out the “confounding of poverty and minority status” (p. 271) in the lives of students, which affects students’ vision of education as a means of achieving success. Factors in schools which increase students’ risk of academic failure include irrelevant and meaningless curriculum; absence of authentically caring educators; lack of respect from teachers and administrators; low and negative expectations by educators and the students; and limited resources (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Burney & Beilke, 2008; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Marrs, Hemmert, & Jansen, 2007). Research in rural schools (Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007) found that when educators label students as at-risk they tend to focus on their students’ deficits and ignore their strengths. Furthermore, a study in this particular school (McMahon, 2011) reported that instances of social and economic risk in the community, instead of being reduced, were compounded by school, district, and state policies and practices.

The concept of resilience has been and continues to be related to notions of risk and as is the case with risk, resilience can be understood in terms of individual factors and/or interpersonal relationships. In spite of multiple understandings of this term, Kaplan (2006) contends, resilience “rests upon the idea of achievement of positively (or the avoidance of negatively) valued outcomes in circumstances where adverse outcomes would normally be expected” (p. 39). The correlation of resilience with risk raises questions related to who is deemed resilient, who determines which outcomes are designated as indicative of resilience, and ultimately the potential for resilience to be used as a mechanism for reinforcing the status quo (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006; Kaplan, 2006; McMahon, 2006). In spite of these concerns, there is a need to examine school policies and practices that enhance or hinder student success and to acknowledge that some students experience greater risk of academic underachievement than others and that academic achievement is a gatekeeper to life chances for adolescents and adults.

Individual Resilience Factors

Consistent with moves away from deficit approaches, and in an effort to understand how some children and adolescents overcome, or succeed in spite of apparent risk factors, researchers (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Norman, 2001; Taylor & Thomas, 2001) identify resilience-building protective factors and processes. Protective factors and processes are seen as mechanisms that “ameliorate” or “buffer” a “person’s reaction to a situation that in ordinary circumstances leads to maladaptive outcomes” (Taylor & Thomas, 2001 p. 9). Resilience exists both within individuals and in relationships between and among people, as a result of internal factors and external processes that enhance rather than inhibit student achievement within schools. Some researchers (Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994) embrace a viewpoint that locates resilience in the individual. Their language refers to ‘resilient children and adolescents,’ rather than ‘children and adolescents who are resilient.’ Although resilience is a positive depiction, talk of ‘resilient students’ may put us in the uncomfortable position of referring to students who continue to be at risk as ‘non-resilient students,’ absolving schools of their responsibilities and blaming students for their lack of resilience. In addition, the identification of children and adolescents who succeed in spite of social disadvantage, hardships and the presence of at-risk factors, and who are able to develop strategies and coping skills which enable them to adapt to life’s stressors and attain outcomes that are better than have

been anticipated for them as resilient, raises another concern. While the equation of resilience with risk enables us to adopt a discourse of possibility when speaking of 'students at risk,' the concept of resilience within the literature is limited to students, who for whatever reasons and according to whom, are deemed at risk, rather than all students. Since conceptions of resilience in educational literature assume the existence of conditions, which students overcome in order to achieve success, the assumption appears to be that resilience exists only when students have been placed at risk and when they attain academic success. Researchers (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Norman, 2000; Smokowski et al., 1999; Wang, 1997; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994) identify personal attributes differentiating resilient children from their peers who are vulnerable or at-risk. These include an absence of organic deficits, having an easy temperament combined with increased responsiveness, adaptability, and social competency. Individuals considered to be resilient also possess an internal locus of control, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose, as well as a sense of humor to generate comic relief, reduce stress, and find alternative ways of looking at things.

Environmental Resilience Factors

Shifting to a focus on relationships, Norman (2000) contends that resilience "is not a fixed attribute of individuals. Rather, a resilient or adaptive outcome is a process of interaction between environmental and personal factors" (p. 3). As a metaphor for resilience, he provides an image of a hammer hitting a tire in contrast to a hammer hitting a pane of glass and contends that the interactions between the hammer and the tire are indicative of resiliency, while the hammer and the glass are not. While this is a powerful tactual, kinesthetic metaphor, resilience is still located in the tire rather than in the relationship. Over a period of time, as happens with students, repeated attacks from the environment accumulate, causing the tire to become increasingly more vulnerable, weakening its resilience. Initially, when the tire and the glass are both being battered by the same external forces, the tire alone possesses internal factors that enable it to resume its original shape. Consequently, the claim could be made that the tire is resilient and the glass is not. If, however, the glass and the tire come into contact, the result may be different and neither may be seen as resilient, supporting the contention that context impacts on resilience. Accordingly, in addition to individual attributes, resilience exists in interpersonal dynamics; specifically, student resilience is fostered by support from family members, peers, and social and

community organizations and institutions.

In keeping with efforts to broaden conceptions of resilience, Pianta and Walsh (1998) also contend, “resiliency is produced by the interactions among a child, family, peers, school, and community” (p. 411). As one of the major arenas whereby interactions and relationships among individuals, groups, and systems occur, schools have a significant role to play in the creation of environments which are conducive to resilience. This assertion was supported by Smokowski et al.’s (1999) findings that the ‘relational bonds’ between teachers and adolescents were important in buffering risks and facilitating adaptive development. “Favorite teachers were among the most frequently cited positive role models in the lives of children. The teachers were not simply instructors facilitating academic growth, but also became confidants—positive models for personal identification” (p. 427-8). According to Westfall and Pisapia (1994), resilient relationships are formed between students and educators who have “positive expectations and that push the students while remaining very supportive and understanding” (p. 3). Participation in the life of the school beyond the classrooms in curricular and extra-curricular activities is an important contributor to student resilience. Westfall and Pisapia (1994) reported that students frequently mention the significance of positive use of time and meaningful involvement in school and/or other activities that are not designated for at-risk students or students with specific problems. Success in these activities and involvement in leadership initiatives enhance self-esteem by providing recognition and a sense of accomplishment and have the potential to connect students with their peers and the school in meaningful ways.

In spite of the problematic nature underlying conceptions of resilience, this notion can prove to be beneficial to our understanding of educators’ roles and responsibilities in creating space for student empowerment within school environments, and in providing a vehicle for discussing aspects of individuals and relationships which enable students to be empowered within schools. According to Kaplan (2006), “the concept of resilience is useful precisely because it instigates so many conceptual or theoretical issues” (p. 45). When meanings attached to resilience, as well as the locatedness, world-views and intentions of the definers are examined; the language of risk and resilience can be employed to inform educators’ practices with enhanced awareness of the impact of interactions with

educators and school systems on the lived experiences of our students.

Research Context

Data were collected at a grade 6-12 school, which had been operating in Florida for three years and had consistently received failing grade. A number of risk factors associated with economics, race, and ethnicity were present in the school community. For example, over 70% of the students at this school qualify for free and reduced lunch programs (Bringing Learning to Life, 2009). In addition to poverty, being a member of a visible minority group and first language acquisition other than English are often identified as risk factors (Barr & Parrett, 2000). In this school, relative to the state average of 49.58% for the year this data was collected (Education Information and Accountability Services, 2010), over 90% of the students are members of visible minoritized groups composed of 68% African American, 23% Latino/Latina, and 1% multiracial (Bringing Learning to Life, 2009).

In spite of legislation that mandates that every classroom be staffed by highly qualified teachers, Marrs, Hemmert, and Jansen (2007) report that rural schools in economically disadvantaged areas “have difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff” (p. 30). Although Barley and Beesley (2007) identify teacher retention as an important factor in successful rural schools, it can also be a detriment when teachers are reappointed because of the district’s inability to attract skilled, engaged, and engaging educators. This school is located in one of the three lowest paying districts in the state and there is a 21% to 32% salary deficit dependent on position, academic degree, and experience between salaries here and the state average (Education Information and Accountability Services, 2009). Florida ranks 45th out of 50 states in per pupil spending (http://www.epodunk.com/top10/per_pupil/index). One consequence of the salary disparity is that educators choose to work here either because they are committed to having positive impacts on the students and this community or because they are unable to find employment in proximate districts.

The principals and assistant principals were appointed with a mandate to raise this grade to a C or higher in one academic year. The school was chosen for this research because of the existence of risk

factors in the school and community and the school improvement plan's focus on steps to address its failing designation and attain a pass. Additionally, the principal had existential knowledge of the ways in which "modernity empties rural people from the countryside and deposits them in the urban world" (Corbett, 2009a) and was committed to shifting teachers' attitudes toward students and their families from deficits to possibilities, and from teaching as knowledge transmission to engaged learning. Members of the administrative team were interested in broadening their understandings of resilience as a vehicle for increasing student achievement and school improvement and were hopeful that the findings would help shape future in-school professional development sessions.

Methodology

Although the concepts of reliability and validity are founded in quantitative methodologies, the notion of validity is often used to substantiate the rigor of qualitative studies. Creswell (2012) lists eight forms of validity for qualitative research and suggests that researchers use at least two of these in their own studies. This research demonstrates four of these forms, including: clarifying researcher bias; peer review and debriefing, member checking, and thick descriptions. In clarifying my bias as a researcher I employed bracketing techniques to examine my own beliefs at each stage of the research. Throughout this process, I acknowledged and set aside preconceptions that I brought to the data about the impact that race, gender, age, subject specialization, and years of professional experience might have on the responses. Consistent with claims by Tufford and Newman (2012), this process not only mitigated adversarial effects associated with researcher predispositions, it also served to "enhance the acuity of the research and facilitate more profound and multifaceted analysis and results" (p. 81). Academic faculty members from two different universities and school administrators familiar with settings similar to the site of this research served as peer reviewers and provided feedback throughout the conceptualization of the study, data collection, analysis, and dissemination stages of this research. The interviews were created and administered according to university and the school district human subjects' protocols, pseudonyms were used, and subject confidentiality was maintained to the extent that only participants in the study would be able to accurately identify the site and/or their own contributions. The data were professionally transcribed and the participants were provided with the opportunity to review, edit, and add to transcript data. Consistent with Creswell's (2009) systematic

process for coding data, I read the transcripts multiple times individually and in groups, first to gain a global sense of the data and then to divide responses into sections. I integrated the sections, analyzed statements, and categorized them into clusters of emerging themes. Overarching codes related to individual and environmental resilience factors were derived from the interview questions and specific codes within these larger categories became apparent from the interview data. The raw data were read multiple times, revisited to check for accuracy, and the themes were critically analyzed to ensure that they authentically represented the phenomenon. Throughout this process, I acknowledged and set aside preconceptions that I brought to the data about the impact that race, gender, subject specialization, and years of professional experience might have on the responses. Finally, as the manuscript is written, “rich, thick description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability” (Creswell, 2012, p. 252). As with any study, there are some inherent limitations. Qualitative research by design does not purport to be generalizable. Additionally, interview data is subject to what Taylor and Brown (1988) identified as a self-enhancing variable that suggests individuals’ need to be self-protective and to present positive depictions of themselves.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 faculty members, 3 administrators, and 11 teachers, who volunteered to participate in response to a request I made at a faculty meeting. The teachers were representative of the faculty in subjects and grade levels taught, years of experience, gender, and race.¹ The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and participants received copies of their interview transcripts in order to conduct member checks and edit for accuracy and completeness. This research was designed to effectively answer research questions about educators in one failing school’s understandings of resilience; ways in which resilience was enacted in the school as it focused on changing its failing status; as well as school, district, and state policies and practices which facilitate and/or inhibit resilience building. Unfortunately, although the data are specific to this school, this situation is not unique in the state.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the data included: understandings of student and educator resilience;

individual and environmental facets of resilience; and factors that facilitate and hinder the enactment of resilience. The data revealed that the educators believed that student resilience was important for academic achievement in this school. Their understandings of resilience were overall aligned with beliefs that students need to be prepared to leave their rural community. All of the participants identified individual resilience factors as existing or not and as characteristic of certain students. Most of the interviewees spoke about issues that facilitated or hindered the development of resilient relationships in the school and the community and some referred to their own resilience as crucial to their work in this environment. A few of the educators, especially the administrators, identified the importance of resilience building and the roles that educators and administrators in creating conditions conducive to the development of resilience for students and educators.

Individual Resilience Factors

The respondents defined individual student resilience as “the capacity to engage yourself in the learning process in spite of all the other circumstances that potentially could hold you back” and: You just continue to move forward, try to get where you need to get. Regardless of whatever obstacles and things coming your way, there’s no stopping. It may get tough, you may have to slow down, but you’ve got to continue to move forward.

One assistant principal said, “I think many of... the personal struggles... that have strengthened them, personal things they’ve gone through helps them know that they can make it, they don’t have to quit.” Having clearly identified social and economic risk factors in the school community, participants’ examples related resilience to academic achievement and were primarily focused on student behaviors directed toward post-secondary education admissions and scholarships. The other assistant principal referred to “students that are going to [a community college] to get their associate degree before they get out of high school. Those are your high achieving students.” A teacher described resilient students as:

Outgoing, determined, achievers. They realize that this is a part of life. They have someone in their family who’s talking to them, letting them know that every day isn’t going to be what you want it to be—but you work with the hand that you are dealt and things will change.

Another teacher relayed an experience with a student whom she identified as resilient that had been offered a scholarship by a local community college. “She told me I have a full scholarship at this other university....And she said ‘I called [the community college] and they said I can take my money from there and bring it over here.’” Although most of the participants were able to identify an individual student they considered to be resilient, when asked if in general the students at this school were resilient some participants said, “No.” Several respondents suggested that perhaps about 10% of the students were resilient.

The sentiment that ‘you work with what you have’ was also reflected in the administrators’ descriptions of their own resilience in working with faculty and students. One assistant principal said, “I think it is that type of school and very well can be that environment for teachers to excel.” The principal reflected on the necessity for administrators to be resilient stating, “If I close this door and I start crying about what I don’t have, nothing will get done.” This sentiment was echoed by yet another assistant principal who claimed, “It’s like we can’t quit regardless of what push we get... resistance we get from students, we get from teachers or anybody else.”

It is often difficult to totally separate individual factors that enhance resilience and contexts, which enable them to thrive. Relationships between the two notions were highlighted during the interviews. As one teacher observed, “You don’t get that resilience if there isn’t a connection between them [the students] and what you’re doing.” Demonstrating intersections between individual resilience attributes and environmental influences, the principal prepared to face a backlash from the faculty related to specific recommendations for improvements to their teaching practice and, at times, the termination of teaching assignments. She reflected on one of the difficult aspect of building a resilient school community, which involved:

Difficult conversations. I hate it when I have to not recommend back a teacher. But if they’re not good for kids, then they can’t get recommended back...Sometimes they’re not a good fit for teaching and learning in general... and that takes counseling as an administrator, how you

sit down and you have that conversation. You look at a person in their eye and you say to them, 'You know, I'm not going to recommend you back next year and this is why it's going to happen.' You don't want to be in the position of not recommending them back. So, how do you say to them 'you need to do better, specifically this is what I want you to work on.' And how do you talk to them about that in a way that they listen to you and not walk out of the room.

Individual resilience factors exist within and are impacted by environmental factors.

Environmental Resilience Factors

The majority of responses from both teachers and administrators to questions about building a resilient school community were expressed as policies and practices that were needed, as opposed to those that already existed in the school. Visions for a resilience building school community involved developing the culture of the school into one which: focused on changing the mindset of students and faculty; offered students a broader range of possibilities for their futures; increased academic course offerings; provided authentic and meaningful curricular initiatives; enacted engaging teaching/learning practices; and engendered supportive faculty/student relationships.

School leadership and resilience

Although for the majority of teacher interviewees, changing the culture meant changing students' attitudes about school and work, for four teachers and the administrators, changing the culture meant working concurrently to change teachers' and students' attitudes, beliefs, and practices. A senior teacher observed, "This particular principal I think is on the right track. She has a track record of building schools that are low performing... I think there's a sincere desire to get the kids to succeed." The principal reflected on her eight-month tenure at the school. She referred to this phenomenon as similar to "walking a balance beam" and described her experience.

The first month it was really kind of just me, maybe the first two months. It was a struggle getting them in class. It was a struggle getting the teachers to even set up so that the kids knew when they came into the classroom exactly what they were supposed to be learning... Some things we just had to change. I just started saying, 'get to class,' not out of anger, just a broken record. I just wanted them to know this is what was expected. They got to class and then bit

by bit, I started walking by and inspecting informally. They started teaching more. When we took the FCAT, they were so serious. Kids walked out saying... 'I think I did really good. I think we're going to do it. I tried really hard, you know?' They really care about—this is important. They have decided they don't want to be in and out of school anymore and that meant a lot to me.

Each of the administrators spoke of the need for all members of the school community to help one another to achieve the kind of school that engenders success. At the school level this included the administrators themselves working “to empower teachers more” and within teacher groups to “create a more collegial environment...a way to get the teachers from teaching in isolation, working in isolation, talking to each other” and “teacher training which could be train the trainer model. Teachers actually get more from what they get from their peers.”

School and classroom practices

Resilience was understood to involve developing relationships between educators and students and “working with students so that “the students find out you care, they'll move on, they'll move forward and they won't quit on you.” One assistant principal said,

Once you change the mindset and the culture that people have been used to, it brings about that ‘we can do it and we won't quit until we get where we need to get’... We're trying to get, not just the students, but the entire faculty and staff, everybody here to believe that we can do it together.

The principal said that at the site level “we have to not be so quick to expel and to kick out,” and identified a need to bring supports such as social workers into the school. An assistant principal proposed that in addition to existing community outreach initiatives, part of the work of the parent liaison department should be to develop positive relationships with the middle-class parents who have their children educated in neighboring districts. The feeling was that reversing the ‘middle-class flight’ from the school would create pressure and support for more advanced placement courses.

Five of the teachers spoke of the importance of student engagement and provided examples of their classroom practices, which utilized students' social acumen, developed their academic skills, and increased their involvement in their own learning. One example was a team teaching initiative, which resulted in the production of a school newspaper. A teacher spoke with obvious pride about the students' involvement.

You had the editor communicating with the photographer who wants to tell them we need a picture of this and that and that. And then you had the writers, they were writing stories and then they would take them over to the editor to proofread and you got the teachers just going from group to group and they really enjoyed it. When they put out that first newsletter, you could see it in their eyes, it was like 'This is mine. This is my work.' It was just wonderful. And right now when they walk in there, they know exactly what to do because this is something that they're interested in.

Other examples included a chemistry class where students conducted analyses of foods and tested and refuted the advertising claims that a spray starch was 100% starch and another teacher's commitment to invest startup money in the students' developed comprehensive business plans. A senior English teacher spoke of activities designed to connect students' current knowledge in developing their abilities to analyze the canons, which would be useful for them if they pursued university degrees. She described her approach.

When I equate the poetry that they're doing, we're doing a sonnet for example, to the rap music, then they're able—if I can take a line from a rap and show them that this is a metaphor, this is a simile; this is metonymy; this is whatever it is. Then when we get to serious stuff, then they have some kind of link to the thing... human nature is human nature and when Romeo puts his head in Juliet's lap, that's what they're talking about. Human nature hasn't changed. The language changes, but the stuff is still the same. Men are men and women are women and children are children.

Resilience building relationships

The administrators and six of the teachers identified a need to develop caring and supportive relationships with students in the school. The principal and assistant principals had this as one of their goals when they came to the school. One of them said,

I build that rapport with students. I may not know every student's name here yet, but every student knows me. And at this point in time, if a student needed some assistance or needed help with anything, I don't think there's a student that wouldn't come to me. So, I'm one of

those that really—I've built rapport with students and tried to get to know them and see what's going on and not just them personally, but even in the classrooms, what's going on. They give you a whole lot of insight.

An experienced teacher advised, "We need to open up and we need to talk. As educators, we can't just sit and give an assignment and say this is what you do. We have to listen to our students. When they begin to have input, that's when they are being engaged." Another teacher observed:

I think teachers should have more patience than anybody else. They should have more love than anybody else and it's hard, because you run out of both. But that's what kids need. They need to know that their teachers love them when nobody else does and that their teachers care when they don't even care.

A novice teacher spoke of the importance and the challenges of developing these relationships.

I love my kids. They're hard to love, but they teach me so much. I've learned so much patience since I've been here. I heard in a movie the other day that people that are hardest to love are the ones that need to be loved the most and that's these kids and we've just got to find a way to get to them all.

One of the senior teachers said that she tells the students "I came from a background very much similar to yours and I feel as if I'm successful and you can be the same way." In order for them to listen to her about their current and future situations she reflected, "I try to establish a relationship with them where they can trust me—and I can show them things."

The main role of one of the assistant principals was to focus on future opportunities for students. He said,

My job is primarily is to make sure that these students are getting the necessary things that they need in order to engage into their college, engage in a four year college. And that is to make sure they're taking the right courses, make sure these courses are offered, make sure that they have the material that they need in order to succeed and to give them some of that college experience. I take them on field trips to college campuses.

Participants spoke about encouraging students to apply for scholarships and the current principal's practice of publicly recognizing recipients and "others who are doing well" during the morning TV show produced by the media class. One of the faculty members suggested that supporting students should be a whole school and community effort. She made the following recommendation:

Show the students that they do have other opportunities that are being offered to them. We need to reach out to the communities and have some of those ones who are prominent, who

are more productive, and are successful come in and mentor our students.

Another teacher said that this had already begun through after school programs run by faith-based organizations that “get the child to just take a look at self and build on these particular things, self-esteem, and once the self-esteem concept is there, then the resilience will come along with that.” An initiative that could be seen as either creating more risk or building resilience in the school is the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), “program that makes up about probably a fourth of the school.” In addition to involvement in weekly school events, according to one teacher:

They participate in summer camp. It’s like a basic training for the students...and they meet other kids in the state of Florida who participate in the camp. They give them responsibility. They have jobs to do and the sergeant, major and the colonel, they tell them and they expect them to do it...It’s not like will you do—this is a job that you’re going to have to do.

The need for high expectations was cited as an important aspect of setting goals for the future.

Future resilience building

An administrator said that the school needed to change so that “minimum curriculum is college prep and then we are integrating some honors and AP classes in there. Is it going to be tough? Yes. So, what kind of supports are we going to have in place for kids to succeed?” She was also adamant that they had to stop the current practice of “allowing students to just sit quietly and fail, because you have some very capable kids that if you just leave them alone, you know, ‘just leave me alone, let me sit here, I won’t bother you, you won’t bother me and just let me fail quietly, okay?’” One aspect of this change in expectations involved working with the teacher librarian

To have extended library days so that maybe she comes in a little bit late, but she stays late so the kids can go in and do their projects, do their history projects, their science projects or just do their homework in a quiet place or use the computer.

The principal was positive about all of the planned changes intended to build on the work that had just begun in the school. She spoke of the importance of her own resiliency in the face of multiple obstacles that she had encountered during her eight months at the school. At the end of the interview she said that she felt things were beginning to turn around and that test scores would show improvement. She said

that one question she has had from some teachers was, “When we get our C, how are we going to spend our money?” Her goals for the future included continuing the work that had merely begun in turning this school into a thriving academic and social community. In addition to working with the students so they could envision multiple possibilities for their futures and seeking ways to increase parental involvement, she spoke of the need to

Empower teachers more... most teachers when they come to work they don't come to work saying, 'oh boy I get to do a crappy job and I'm proud of it.' That's not their intention and so we need to figure out ways to support teachers that are not doing the best job that they can be doing teaching if they're supportable.

One of the assistant principals noted that changing the mindset in the school would not happen overnight. He identified a reduction in “fighting, the big fighting, things that they used to have in the past, it's been non-existent this year” as an indication that changes in the school culture had begun. As the assistant principal in charge of curriculum he also reported that some of the teachers were more involved in the education of their students. He gave an example of a “math teacher that we have... I go in this classroom and this teacher's teaching math, but the students were ... actually engaged in the process of learning the math.” He credits the principal and the manner in which she models her expectations for teachers and students by

Bringing a different set of ideas that they're used to, the staff is used to, helped change the mindset. Once you change the mindset and the culture that people have been used to, it brings about that we can do it and we won't quit until we get where we need to get. So, it's just a change in mindset, a way about people doing things instead of, you having people pound you on the head... in this county, I think that's a type of administrator we've been used to, that old style where, you know, get it done or you hit the road. And I think she still—in a way, she has that in her, but she finds other ways about doing that.

The purpose of this research was to understand how educators in one rural school conceptualize student resilience. The major themes that emerged from the data included the participants' understandings of student and educator resilience factors and how these operate at individual and environmental levels, and the ways they are impacted at macro and micro levels by policies and practices informed by narrow understandings of schooling and academic achievement. These themes are interrelated so that as

examples, the presence or absence of educator resilience is likely to impact student resilience; school characteristics that enhance resilience will effect students positively; and policies at the district or state level and practices at the school level that are antithetical to resilience building will effect student resilience negatively. That being said, the major focus of this paper is on understandings of individual student resilience factors and environmental resilience process.

Discussion

In keeping with other research (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Condly, 2006; McMahon, 2007; Norman, 2000) respondents identified students' individual traits of determination, confidence, problem solving, goal setting, sense of purpose, future directedness, and confidence as resilience factors. All of these qualities could be considered aspects of intellectual ability, which Goldstein and Brooks (2006) identify as a difficult to define, but important factor for individual resilience. The educators provided examples of students they identified as resilient, which were consistent with Kaplan's (2006) claim that resilience "reflects specific characteristics and the mechanisms through which they operate that moderate the relationships between risk factors and outcome variables" (p. 42). In addition, the administrators were able to relate their resilience to the current situation of working to overcome the impacts of being in a failing school. However, the majority of the participants referred to their experiences in overcoming marginalization only as possible models for the students. There was nothing to indicate their awareness of a need to examine their beliefs about when and how resilience dispositions could be developed or the predictive potential of resilience as an individual trait.

Resilient relationships

Extending the notion of resilience beyond traits of individual students, Downey (2008) found that students at-risk require that teachers "(a) build healthy relationships with them, (b) focus on their strengths to increase positive self-esteem, and (c) maintain high, realistic expectations for academic performance" (p. 57). A few of the participants talked of the importance of teaching 'from the heart' and establishing caring relationships with students. Goldstein and Brooks (2006) report "effective programs for youth at risk are child centered and based upon the establishment of relationships with

adults who are caring and respectful and who build trust” (p. 11). The interviewees spoke of care for the students that included high expectations and support which have been shown to be characteristic of “effective teachers of African American students as “warm demanders” who are strong yet compassionate disciplinarians” (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007 p. 341). Consistent with earlier research in resilience and student engagement and its relation to academic achievement (Maynes, 2001; McMahon, 2007; Morrell, 2006; Ruddick & Demetriou, 2003), some of the respondents spoke of the importance of teaching for meaning and authenticity as a means of increasing academic proficiency. The suggestions, which focused on curricular content and modes of delivery, exemplified aspects of Morrell’s (2001) study of the use of student interests to teach literacy and numeracy skills. The development of these aptitudes through the use of culturally relevant teaching approaches, which engaged students in their learning, has also been shown to result in increased scores on standardized tests.

Building a resilient school community

The participants’ future directed visions for building a resilient school community involved changing the culture or “mindset” of the school into one which focused on developing students’ and educators’ strengths; increasing expectations for students and faculty; providing authentic and meaningful curriculum and engaging teaching/learning practices; and engendering supportive faculty/student relationships. The administrators’ expressed desire was to change the mindset to one that was consistent with findings from a recent report (The Learning Partnership, 2009) that resilient behavior can be learned at any age. This would help to overcome the deficit approaches of some faculty members who focused on what they believed the students were lacking when they arrived at the Middle/high School. In addition to envisioning resilience as a latent characteristic of all students, the school community would be enriched by a paradigm shift toward a transactional and transformative notion of resilience (Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2006; Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). Including these aspects emphasizes the interconnectedness of the individual and the environment over time and maintains that in addition to overcoming hardship, through the development of resilience an individual changes his or her personality in order to be better able to overcome adversity in the future. Transactional and transformative concepts also address concerns regarding the respondents’ conceptions of resilience

which have been raised by Kaplan (2006) and McMahon (2007), who described the limitations of emphasizing resilience as a character trait, namely: desirable outcomes are defined by people in positions of power; individuals can be configured as either resilient or not, instead of being in circumstances that are conducive to resilience or non-resilience; and there is a paradox that one must in some sense be resilient in order to become resilient. The participants spoke of the need for students to envision futures beyond their immediate surroundings and the destitution that was part of their daily lives. According to Burney and Beilke (2008) “high achievement...is associated with increased lifetime earnings. Increased education is what will allow students to escape poverty for themselves and future generations” (p. 314). In some sense resilience as future directed is for these participants equated with leaving the rural and moving to more urban and suburban areas.

Some participants identified the need to change the culture of the school in order to overcome the adversity attached to failure and become a resilient organization. They identified aspects of this shift which included altering teachers’ attitudes toward students, teaching and learning; students’ images of themselves as academics and possibilities for their futures; and school, family, and community relations. Some participants expressed an understandably urgent need for fundamental changes to existing policies and practices that recognized the impact that academic success and failure have on students’ lives. These beliefs were consistent with Condly’s (2006) assertion that “because schools are places in which children spend so much time, they are ideal locations for the implementation of programs designed to support children and assist them in overcoming environmental stressors” (p. 229). However, as demonstrated by Schramm-Pate, Jeffries and D’Amico’s (2006) research, changing the culture of a school is a complex and multilayered undertaking that requires strong leadership and time to develop the relationships, skills, beliefs and attitudes that are conducive to the creation and maintenance of a positive school community.

Challenges to building a resilient school community

Unfortunately building resilience is challenging to enact in schools and districts seeking standardized solutions to complex issues. Examples of high expectations and engaging curriculum were counterbalanced by the majority of the interviewees who felt “pressure to ‘cover the curriculum’

[which] is great in high schools today, and at-risk students, particularly those with learning difficulties, may be particularly vulnerable to falling behind” (Marrs, Hemmert, & Jansen, 2007, p. 32). These teachers felt that students ought to be responsible for their own engagement in learning and believed that the high poverty nature of the school community meant that it should focus on vocational and life-skill training as though these exclude academic excellence. This latter belief runs contrary to research by Burney and Beilke (2008) which reported that while socio-economic status is influential, rigorous academic preparation has greater impact on students' successes in post-secondary education. They found that “[s]tudents from the lowest quintiles of family income who had the best academic preparation earned bachelor's degrees at a higher rate than most students from the highest quintile without a rigorous background” (p. 302). The significance of an emphasis on high expectations was supported by studies including Elias, Parker and Rosenblatt's (2006) findings that, "educator expectations can have a powerful impact on students' academic outcomes, regardless of the degree of congruity between those expectations and prior achievement” (p. 325). Teachers and administrators' perceptions about marginalized students and the development of educational resilience are especially significant.

Professional development was identified by some participants as important; however, its content and delivery are crucial to building a resilient school community. Consistent with state and district mandates, the principal mentioned the importance of professional development focused on benchmarks and pacing guides which, while they perhaps serve the immediate goal of raising results on standardized tests, do not begin to address the multilayered issues of rural schools. Garcia and Guerra's (2004) research “reinforces the importance of professional development that identifies elements of the school culture and the school climate that lead to institutional practices that systemically marginalize or pathologize difference” (p. 154). This type of professional development runs contrary to the narrow focus of Florida Department of Education pre-packaged roll-outs. One of the beginning mathematics teachers was adamant that while she wanted to develop her teaching expertise, professional development was a waste of time. None of the sessions she had attended had accounted for even rudimentary things such as the number of class minutes at this school, not to mention more significant issues such as students' prior mastery of the subject and intercultural communication.

In addition to understanding rural classroom realities, meaningful professional development would include developing understandings of and approaches to engage families and community members. Elias, Parker, and Rosenblatt (2006) report that, “studies have found that interventions that connect families with their children’s schools and the larger community with its schools promote educational resilience” (p. 328). These relationships include acknowledging the barriers peculiar to poverty and academic achievement including understanding that a “lack of family involvement should not be construed as lack of concern on the part of caregivers. Many low-income families do not have the luxuries or freedoms that accompany members of the middle class” (Burney & Beilke, 2008, p. 311). Building a resilient school community would require that the educators develop more venues for parental and community involvement, more academic opportunities, and additional supports for sustained achievement.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings provide evidence of initiatives by individual educators in one rural school who sought to increase engagement, generate resilience, and empower students in their own learning. It provides evidence that in spite of pressures on everyone to “cover the curriculum,” some teachers worked toward positive outcomes for students; administrators struggled to change the culture; the principal experienced tensions about re-appointing teachers; and although some teachers focused on deficits, others saw strengths in the students and community. The existing salary disparity combined with administrator turnover contributes to the district’s difficulties in attracting enough of these educators to change the deficit thinking that pervades this school. While there is no guarantee that higher pay translates into better teaching practices, this would serve to create a larger pool of applicants for teaching and administrative positions in the district and would allow for the implementation of policy mandates that every classroom have highly qualified teachers, however that is defined.

Although there is an urgent need to improve test scores in this school because of their role as gatekeepers, the revolving door practice of administrator placement is not creating the conditions

whereby this can happen. The initiatives that this administrative team led were still in nascent phases at the end of the year when the school once again received an F grade. Before she was able to share her knowledge of rural and urban transitions, build communities, and implement findings from this and other research, she and the assistant principals were moved out of the school and a new team was brought in with the same mandate—to immediately raise test scores. The school now has its fourth administrative team in four years. The district and state level focus on immediate narrowly conceptualized results works against the ability to build a resilient school community. Hopefully, the new principals and assistant principals that have been placed at the school will be given the time and support they need to provide the students in this community with the education they deserve.

Future research in rural schools needs to build on these initial findings and problematize the notion of resilience and to examine the overlap between resilient organizations and successful schools. The concept of resilience can be used to further either transformative or replicative forms of social justice (McMahon, 2006). Aligning resilience with success in formal educational institutions that promote “out-migration from rural places” (Corbett, 2009b, p.1) may serve to replicate existing hegemonic structures. In order to be transformative, we as educators need to reconcile the notion of rural place as Corbett (2009b) formulates it with a concept of resilience that honors the local and respects the global, valuing those who choose to stay, and facilitating code-switching strategies needed by those who leave and wish to remain connected to their communities. Successful schools are characterized by strong leadership, a shared sense of purpose, and high levels of involvement (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Downey, 2008; Hind, 1996). It is important to deconstruct what these terms mean and how they are enacted. For example, strong leadership in an effective school, in terms of test results, could be characterized by top down, autocratic controls, which would be antithetical to resilience-building. Raising questions about the purposes and goals of schooling, including students and parents in these conversations, and triangulating responses to surveys and interviews with classroom observations would assist in clarifying these issues and enrich existing research.

¹ The administrative team consisted of 2 African American males and 1 African American female. Teaching assignment breakdowns for the teachers interviewed were: 8 in core subjects and 3 in elective courses; 2 taught grades 6-12; 2 taught grades 6-8; and 7 taught grades 9-12. There were 2 participants with less than 2 years teaching experience, 2 with 3-10 years, 4 with 11-19 years, and 3 with 20+ years. In terms of teacher race and gender, 6 African American female, 1 African American male, 3 White female, and 1 White male teacher were interviewed.

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Author Details

Brenda J. McMahon is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on educational leadership, student engagement, resilience, and democracy in education as well as the roles that race assumes in urban and rural high schools. She is co-editor of the series *Inclusion in Urban Educational environments: Addressing Issues of Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice* for Information Age Publishers.

Correspondence

brenda.mcmahon@uncc.edu