

Why Did They Not Drop Out?

Narratives From Resilient Students

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Recent studies have shown that over 40% of students who attend high school may be at risk of dropping out before obtaining their diploma (Fortin et al., 2004; Lessard et al., 2004). However, despite the higher risk of dropping out, the actual drop-out rate has remained relatively stable at 28%. Although some students do leave school before obtaining their diploma, others, who were equally at risk, do not. They are resilient students; despite the presence of some form of significant risk or challenge in their lives, these students have adapted, persevered, and succeeded.

In an effort to improve the success rate of students, researchers have studied both students who succeed and youth who drop out, but students who are at risk and eventually succeed in obtaining their diploma have not benefited from much scrutiny. Yet, as outlined by Martin and Marsh (2006), learning more about what keeps these students from dropping out could potentially lead to refined prevention efforts if researchers can identify the variables which differentiate resilient students from those who drop out and target these variables in prevention programs.

Resilient students reported knowing where and how to get help when it was needed.

Several different definitions of resilience exist in the literature; however, researchers tend to agree on the presence of two criteria: the occurrence of high risk or trauma and the demonstration of adaptation through positive outcomes (Luthar, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Although there is consensus over this definition, there is significant variance in what researchers consider to be “high risk” and “positive outcomes.” In the present study, resilience is defined as the process of, capacity for, or the outcome of positive adaptation despite the presence of high risk (Howard & Johnson, 2000), where positive adaptation is evidenced through graduation from high school and high risk through the presence of personal, family, and school risk factors. Thus, this qualitative study focusing on academic resilience will show how high school students who were at risk of dropping out of school actually persevered and graduated. After a brief review of the literature, the methodology used in this study, the findings, and a brief discussion will follow.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although resilience has been studied in clinical settings with victims of trauma, few studies have looked specifically at academic resilience in the general population. The results of these studies are reported either in relation to external variables (e.g., social support), internal variables (e.g., self-esteem), or processes involved with resilience (e.g., the interaction of factors over time).

In a study focusing on external variables in 216 ninth grade students, Plunkett et al. (2008), found that there was a relationship between positive academic outcomes and academic support from family members, friends and teachers. More specifically, a youth’s perception of academic support from the opposite-sex parent contributed significantly to a positive change in each of the academic indicators measured while a teacher’s academic support was dominant in explaining a student’s academic satisfaction and grades.

In a study focusing on internal variables associated with resilience, Dumont and Provost (1999) divided their sample of 297 adolescents into three groups: well adjusted, resilient and vulnerable. Their results indicate that self-esteem, problem-solving as a coping strategy, and antisocial/illegal activities with peers were three factors related to resilience. Interestingly, the resilient students reported using problem solving as a positive coping strategy more often than did other students. Their ability to face problems may have contributed to decreasing their stress level. The use of good problem-solving skills, viewed as a marker of self-efficacy, has also been found to be a predictive factor of resilience in a study conducted by Martin and Marsh (2006) with 402 Australian high school students. These researchers identified control, planning, low anxiety, and persistence as four factors predictive of resilience.

Finally, in a qualitative study of 12 students, Drapeau et al. (2007) outlined four processes which emerged from their discourse. These students showed high self-efficacy (mastery), were able to distance themselves from risks, seized new opportunities and showed a multiplication of benefits in the different areas of their lives. Their results also identified three types of turning points associated with resilience. They talked either of 1) action, showing a sense of accomplishment (“I can do it”); 2) relation, in which a significant positive relationship with an adult allowed them to build a sense of trust and security; or 3) reflection, in which they came to the realization that they were at a dead-end, where the perceived threat precipitated change.

In order to achieve positive outcomes, such as perseverance and graduation, students can thus benefit from a number of factors. An important external factor is the support felt or received from parents, teachers, or other significant adults. The ability to face problems and to reach sound decisions (such as walking away from deviant peers) are the resultant of internal factors such as control, planning, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.



Resilient students believed in themselves and in their abilities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to describe how students who were at risk of dropping out of school actually persevered and succeeded in obtaining their high school diploma. More specifically, two research questions were posed: What were the challenges present in the participant's life? What made him or her stay in school?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

In the context of a larger Canadian longitudinal study, 808 participants were contacted twice per year between 1996 and 2007 to answer several questionnaires and participate in interviews (Fortin et al., 2004). From the data gathered over the five years of their secondary schooling, researchers were able to identify the students who were at risk of dropping out of school on the basis of personal, family, and/or school-related risk factors. This data, coupled with Ministry of Education records of who received a high school diploma enabled the researchers to identify the resilient students. Out of the 113 individuals who were identified as resilient students, 60 (36 females; 24 males) agreed to participate in this study. They were all French-Canadian Caucasians living in Quebec, Canada and ages 19 to 22 years when interviewed.

Data Collection

The researchers called all students, informed them about the purpose of the study, and offered them an opportunity to tell their story. A time and place was set with each participant for the interview. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews that were recorded. The interview protocol was built by the researchers and contained open-ended questions that encouraged the description by the participants of their primary and secondary schools, of their relationships with other students, teachers and principals, and also with family members and friends.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed almost exactly the same process as did our work with the dropout population of our longitudinal study (Lessard et al., 2008). The interview transcript was condensed to produce shorter synopses composed of a sequential and non-repetitive narrative which was then analyzed using a strategy proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967). Propositional statements were also created to collapse and expand these elements as needed and to help push the analysis to a more conceptual interpretation (Charmaz, 2005).

FINDINGS

Although 60 students were interviewed, these findings will highlight the stories of two students to whom we have attributed the pseudonyms of Sebastien and Audrey. The stories of these students were chosen because they are representative of the lived experiences of resilient students. Two research questions were posed, thus findings will be presented in two sections to answer each question in turn.

Challenges

In answering the first research question, the students' discourse reveals challenges at three different levels: family-related, school-related, or personal. On the home front, a common challenge faced by the resilient students was the divorce of their parents which brought about changes both in address and in family structure. Moving meant adapting to different schools and friends. The change in family structure meant dealing with new significant others in their parents' lives, with or without new siblings. In this climate of change, participants described their parents as less available to help them with their school work. The story of Sebastien clearly shows the challenges he faced during childhood and adolescence.

SEBASTIEN

When I was five years old, my parents parted ways. After a while, both my parents found new partners in life. I never understood why at the time, but my mother and I moved frequently, always staying in the same town, though. I changed schools almost each year in primary school and I had to make new friends each time, which was never a problem for me. I always had a good relationship with teachers. I paid attention in class and was a good student, particularly in math. In primary school, I also did really well in music. I played piano and alto. Eventually, I had to choose between music and sports. I chose hockey. In secondary school, the sports-study program was set up in such a way that I spent the morning in class and the afternoon on the ice. Hockey kept me out of trouble. Because I was part of the hockey team, I never was a victim of intimidation. To the contrary, I was hot! I was a leader and I was surrounded by friends.

Life was going well until my mother got cancer. She fought it for four years and we had high hopes that she would beat it, but she passed away when I was 13 years old. I was left with my father, who has a neurological disease. He can't work, which means that we did not have much money. His disease also affects his memory. I would talk to him and he would forget what we talked about. It might explain why my relationship with my father was never really good. Living with him brought about several changes. For one thing, he couldn't cook, so I did not eat as well and a healthy diet is important for a hockey player! It was more difficult for me to concentrate in class. I dealt with my mother's death by becoming more introverted. Teachers were supportive and insisted I talk to a psychologist, so I did. I always knew when and where to ask for help. I have to say though, quite frankly, in high school hockey was my family, my life, and my motivation to keep going to school, even when the going got tough.

Although Sebastien is the only participant to have suffered the death of a parent, the difficult nature of his relationship with his father was representative of the lived experience of several students. Other students described fathers who were gambling, alcoholic, unknown, or always away at work. These students either felt rejected by their fathers or described an in-existent or cold relationship with them. When life was more difficult on the home front, the students turned to their relationships with people at school to help them keep a positive outlook on life.

For some students, the challenges were not only related to the family. In school, they experienced some problems either because of learning difficulties, conflicts, or frequent changes in schools. Audrey talked about how she worked hard to overcome her difficulties in school. Her story helps to put her challenges into perspective.

AUDREY

My father left when he learned that my mother was pregnant with me. I never knew him. My mother raised me on her own until she met my brother and sister's father, who lived with us until my sister was three years old. Then, it took a few years until my mother met another man. She never lived with him, though. We moved often, but we always stayed in the same town. I changed schools three times while in primary school. Being shy, it took me some time to make new friends each time.

All went well in primary school. Teachers were really nice to me. They would come see me when they thought I did not understand. I loved English but had a really hard time with math. In class, I always paid attention. I never let others get me sidetracked. I did what was asked of me. In high school, math was still hard, but French was worse. I just couldn't handle it. I was failing. I saw the final exams coming and I kept telling myself that I had to succeed. I might have gone to ask for help, but I really did not get along with my French teacher. He was a dictator. I kept telling myself that I can do it. I did it, I passed my final exam and I got my high school diploma.

Conflicts with teachers were not representative of the experience of most resilient students. To the contrary, as was the case with Sebastien following his mother's death, the resilient students found that they could count on their teachers with whom they had established positive relationships. Most of these students behaved well in class and did what was asked of them. As was the case with Sebastien, most of them also took part in activities at school. One student talked of pastoral activities which helped her make friends each time her family moved and she changed schools.

When they could not count on their parents these resilient students turned to significant adults and got the help they needed.

Finally, on the personal level, some students reported having health-related challenges. One student attributed her obsessive-compulsive disorder to her parents' divorce. She consulted both psychologists and psychiatrists. She underwent therapy and was medicated for some time. Audrey and Sebastien both consulted a psychologist as a means to help them get through rough times.

In answering the first research question, it becomes apparent that although resilient students faced personal, family and school-related challenges, the most recurrent and seemingly significant ones were related to their family. As was expressed by Sebastien, his problems in school appeared following his mother's death. The divorce and consequent frequent moves were destabilizing factors in the lives of these students. Nevertheless, they used strategies which enabled them to succeed in obtaining their diplomas.

Protective Strategies

In answering the second research question, three types of protective strategies were used by resilient students. First, they established relationships. Second, they used positive inner discourse and finally, they reached decisions aimed at keeping them on track towards graduation.

It was clear through Sebastien's story that hockey kept him in school. It was both the activity in and of itself, but it was also the ties hockey fostered and the status it brought him. It gave him great pride to be a part of the hockey team and it made him popular at school. For many students, these relationships kept them in school. One student stated that she went to school just to see her friends and to escape her family life. Another had a hard time during his transition between primary and secondary school, but he had his friends and he quickly established good relationships with his teachers. The school psychologists also provided help when these students were experiencing difficulties. Resilient students reported knowing where and how to get help when it was needed.

On a different level, the students' inner discourse also showed evidence of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy. When reflecting on their school trajectories and experiences in general, most of the students stated that they always knew they would graduate from high school. One student talked about her personal strengths and said quite plainly that she is "intelligent and can do things and succeed." Another student stated that in her mind, she had set her sights on a high school diploma. She just knew she would get it. Audrey's words were, "I can do it." Resilient students believed in themselves and in their abilities.

Finally, resilient students made strategic choices. Their decisions were aimed at keeping them on track, whether it was about their choices in friends, activities or plans for the future. Sebastien and a number of other students admitted having tried smoking marijuana, but their discourse focused on how they deliberately reached the decision to distance themselves from the friends who took up this habit.

DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of these resilient students provide a more vivid portrayal of the interplay of all risk and protective factors in a particular context. Some findings from our study tend to confirm some trends in the literature while other findings offer a different outlook on resilience.

It was clear from the resilient students' discourse that they benefited from the social support of friends, teachers, and psychologists, as did the students who participated to the study conducted by Plunkett et al. (2008). A remarkable difference, however, was the lack of parental support afforded to these students. Fathers were absent and mothers were often unavailable to help them with school work. The distress expressed by the resilient students pertaining to the divorce of their parents was largely related to the changes brought about by the divorce.

A second trend present in the literature (Dumont & Provost, 1999) which was confirmed in this study was the presence of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy in resilient students. Students clearly stated that they knew they could do it. When faced with difficulties in school, they expressed their thoughts about trying harder, about believing in their abilities. They knew how to get help and keep on the right track.

Third, the social support that these students solicited from friends, teachers and psychologists could be considered as a problem-solving



The social support that these students solicited from friends, teachers, and psychologists could be considered as a problem-solving strategy used to improve their situation.

strategy used to improve their situation. They were resourceful and demonstrated an ability to seek and obtain help. This demonstration of self-efficacy has been documented in resilient students (Hauser, 1999; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Resilient students also showed an ability to push trouble away, distancing themselves from antisocial peers (Drapeau et al., 2007).

Where Martin and Marsh (2006) talked about control and planning, we expressed similar findings in different terms. Control and planning were expressed in the resilient students' discourse through the decisions they reached daily. They made conscious decisions regarding their friends, their behavior, and their activities. They were clear on the path to take to get their high school diploma. They also talked about their plans for the future and the steps they were undertaking to make their dreams a reality, which demonstrates their persistence, another concept previously documented by Martin and March (2006).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, each student reaches the decision to stay in school or to drop out; however, the choice is not made in a vacuum. Our study was aimed at describing what students considered to be challenges in their school trajectory and how they overcame them and graduated.

Our findings suggest that the resilient students experienced challenges in their family, at school, and/or in their personal lives. Their most significant challenge was found in their families. Students reported receiving little support from parents, particularly with regards to school. Those students who experienced personal or academic challenges seemed to know where to seek the social

support needed. They benefited from the support of friends, teachers and other significant adults. Beyond their ability to establish relationships, they also showed both self-efficacy and a healthy self-esteem. Their inner discourse was positive, and they expressed knowing that they had what it took to graduate. They reached daily decisions that kept them on a trajectory towards graduation.

An important trend to highlight is the positive role teachers and other school staff, such as psychologists, played in the lives of these adolescents. When they could not count on their parents, these resilient students turned to significant adults and got the help they needed. Teachers and school psychologists should thus be aware of the positive influence they can have on students through positive relationships. Prevention efforts could start with establishing positive relationships with students. ↪



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