

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS:  
A CASE STUDY OF RESILIENT QUALITIES THAT ENCOURAGE  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## **ABSTRACT**

Stephanie Hawkins. **ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS:  
A CASE STUDY OF RESILIENT QUALITIES THAT ENCOURAGE ACADEMIC  
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This case study examined academically successful economically disadvantaged (ED) students from one intact Caucasian family through parents', students', and teachers' perceptions of the reasons for resilience. The problem is that little research exists exploring qualities of academically successful ED Caucasian students. Because being a high school dropout significantly affects students, families, schools, and society, risk factors were explored; protective factors that help students overcome risk factors were also investigated. This study describes why academically successful ED students from one intact Caucasian family in Tennessee thrive despite risk factors working against them. Findings include the importance of Christian faith to the family in the case study and its positive effect on academic achievement. Suggestions for further research are also included.

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the following:

- All of the economically disadvantaged families who, against all odds, are helping their children become successful despite their hardships. Your tireless efforts are appreciated.
- The family that allowed me into their home and hearts. I will forever be in your debt. May God heap many blessings upon you.
- All of the educators who teach every student, regardless of life situation or lack of support, with understanding hearts and hopeful demeanors. You are the unsung heroes.
- The living and lasting memory of Dr. Jill Jones, who touched the lives of so many and made the world a better place.

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Gratitude that cannot be described in words is owed to my family and friends who have all showed great compassion and kindness toward me during the whole process. For my daughter, McKenzie, I hope that your competitive spirit that comes from both your dad and me drives you to be the best you can be and complete important life work, just as you have allowed me time to complete this project. To my husband, Jay, who constantly reminded me, “If this were easy, everybody at the grocery store would be Dr. So-and-So,” thank you for your support and encouragement. You have been my rock in stormy times. To my mother, the one who taught me that life is hard, so you have to work harder, I owe my deepest respect. For my mother-in-law, who kept asking me when I was going to be finished – it is finally finished.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR)

Economically Disadvantaged (ED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Interviewee (IE)

Interviewer (IR)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

The implications of not earning a regular high school diploma in today's global society are far worse than in the past. The number of jobs available to dropouts is decreasing, and the jobs pay less money per hour, require work more hours per week, and yield less over a lifetime (Bost, 2007). Students not completing high school are more likely to become involved with drugs (Beauvais, Chavez, Oetting, Deffenbacher, & Cornell, 1996), more likely to receive welfare (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991; Rumberger, 1983), and more likely to be in jail (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995). Still, approximately 7,000 students drop out of high school in the United States every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the 2007-2008 school year 2,965,286 public school students, excluding those in South Carolina, graduated with a high school diploma (Stillwell, 2010). This number of students resulted in an Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) for 2007-2008 of 74.9%, ranging from a low of 51.3% in Nevada to a high of 89.6% in Wisconsin. The median state AFGR was 76.4%, and Tennessee's AFGR was 74.9% (Stillwell, 2010).

The NCES reported 613,379 dropouts from high school in the 2007-2008 school year. The overall event dropout rate of 49 reporting states and the District of Columbia for 2007-2008 was 4.1%. The lowest dropout rate of 1.7% was credited to New Jersey and Indiana, and Louisiana had the highest rate: nearly 7.5%. Tennessee's dropout rate reported by the NCES was 3.9% (Stillwell, 2010). Because the economically disadvantaged (ED) student subgroup experiences a higher dropout rate than all other

students, the need to find solutions is paramount to individual and societal success.

One of the most frequently noted predictors of students dropping out of public high school in the United States is low socioeconomic status (SES) of the family (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2007; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987; Rumberger, 1983; Weis, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989). High school students from low-income homes continue to drop out at higher rates than all other SES groups (Bogges, 1998; Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991). According to the NCES in 2000, 10% of high school students from low SES homes dropped out of high school; this percentage is twice that of middle-income students and nearly six times more than students from high-income homes (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Dropout rates for low-income students have remained steady since 1990 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

A related complication to low SES is living in a poor community or attending an economically disadvantaged school. A study by Croninger and Lee (2001) revealed that fifteen percent of the students came from poverty level homes, fourteen percent had at least one parent who did not graduate from high school, sixteen percent were from single-parent homes, nine percent had three or more social risks, ten percent had been retained, and eleven percent from the sample dropped out of high school (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) found that the students who were most at risk attended large high schools in urban areas, were minorities, and lived in low-income homes with only one parent. Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) specified that more than half of all dropouts were produced by only 12% of the high schools. This same 12% of high schools also produced 50% of all Hispanic dropouts and 58% of all African

American dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Historically, studies in the medical field prompted other fields to consider risk and resilience. The landmark Framingham Study in 1949 aimed to pinpoint reasons some people developed heart disease while others did not (Dawber & Kannel, 1966). The study, named for the city in Massachusetts in which it took place, did not seek a cure for heart disease; the researchers wanted to discover the traits and signs of contracting the disease so that they could predict who would become sick and prevent it from happening in the first place. Dawber and Kannel (1966) used the term *risk factor* as it is used today and noted that the presence of multiple risk factors contributed to “a marked increase in susceptibility” ( p. 554).

Werner’s 1955 Kauai Longitudinal Study followed all of the 698 children born on the island in 1955 for 40 years and examined risk and protective factors (Werner, 2005). Participants were monitored at ages 1, 2, 10, 18, 32, and 40, “. . . stages in the life cycle that are critical for the development of trust, autonomy, industry, identity, intimacy, and generativity” (Werner, 2005, p. 11). Although faced with many different risk factors, such as limited maternal education, poverty, and divorce, approximately one third of the children were successful in school, socially well adapted, and well behaved. By age 40, none of these subjects who were considered at risk were on welfare, and all of them were employed with lower-than-average divorce rates, mortality rates, and health issues (Werner, 2005). Werner and Garnezy (1974) concluded that being considered at risk does not necessarily mean a person will be unsuccessful or less productive, and protective factors can help counteract risk factors to encourage resilient qualities and actions.

Many risk factors contribute to the likelihood of students dropping out of high school. These variables include family factors, such as family structure and

socioeconomic status, and parental factors, such as involvement, support, level of education, and routines. Fortunately, some students have personal, resilient qualities to combat these risk factors and become academically successful. Teachers play vital roles in the lives of students, and their perceptions about students and why some students are successful are very important. Likewise, schools play active parts in the lives of these students. Understanding how the risk factors and the resilient qualities interact is important to finding ways to help improve academic achievement.

In their research of risk factors affecting educational outcomes, Schoon, Parson, and Sacker (2004) surmised that social-psychological aspects, such as a parent's aspirations and expectations regarding education, could mediate low socioeconomic status (SES). However, Boon (2008) noted, "When students are not living with their parents, this significant influence might be diminished or absent removing a protective factor from the student's immediate social context" (p. 94). When family structure is fractured, causing the child to live with only one or no parent, a domino effect occurs. Not only does the child lose the support of one parent, but the child also loses other mechanisms of support, "such as increased monitoring that helps to augment students' engagement with their studies and perhaps their coping strategies" (Boon, 2008, p. 94).

The composition of the people living in the same house is one aspect of family structure; another aspect of family structure is size of the family. In *Dumber by the Dozen*, Zajonc (1975) hypothesized, "the larger the family, the lower the overall level of intellectual functioning" (p. 43). In 1975, Zajonc and Markus posited the confluence model, stating a relationship between sibship size, intellectual development, order of birth, and spacing of birth. According to this model, the intellectual environment deteriorates with the addition of children. After a study of 533 children in large and

small families, Nuttall and Nuttall (1979) agreed with Zajonc and Markus that having younger children closely spaced in age tends to lessen their intelligence. However, some have suggested that low SES parents are more likely to have larger families, making SES, not the size of the family, the causal factor (Guo & VanWey, 1999a).

The degree of parent involvement in a child's education and educational decisions has been proven to make a significant difference in whether or not a child drops out or completes high school (Rumberger, Ghatak, Pousos, Ritter, & Dornbush, 1990). High school dropouts typically come from homes with weaker support systems for education, not enough supervision, permissive parenting, low expectations, and excessive punishment for not meeting unrealistic expectations (Rumberger et al., 1990; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Astone & McLanahan, 1991).

Parent support in the home and parent involvement in the school can be two different things. According to Burleson and MacGeorge (2002), verbal and nonverbal behavior intended to help others who need support is supportive communication. Supportive communication and supportive interactions have proven to moderate issues leading to academic failure (Strom & Boster, 2007). When parents share their expectations and values and place emphasis on school, their supportive communication affects whether the child stays in school or becomes a dropout. Positive parent-child interactions also mediate negative school experiences and influence the degree of educational attainment (Strom & Boster, 2007).

Parent level of education also plays a part in student resilience and academic attainment. In a study of over 4,000 family cases, Bronfenbrenner (1994) delineated categories of students by the maternal level of education when studying grade point average and levels of parental monitoring of activities outside the home. Results

indicated that the child living with both biological parents who frequently monitored the child's activities and whose mother had an education beyond high school had definite academic advantages (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Established family routines suggest organization within the family that helps to support the link to school (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Fiese (2002) conducted a five-year longitudinal study beginning at age four with families dedicated to rituals and routines. The children scored higher on standardized tests than the children whose families did not commit to routines and rituals. Norton (1993) suggested that family routines prepare children for school routines, providing expectations and structure. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) noted, "Naturally occurring family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development" (p. 284).

Outside the home, teachers impact their students' lives daily, and the relationships built between teachers and students are crucial to academic success, especially for those at-risk of dropping out of high school. Students who have positive relationships with teachers receive assistance and guidance they might not get at home and view teachers as encouraging and responsive to their needs. Due to increased motivation and a feeling of being supported, these students are less likely to leave high school without a diploma (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Catterall, 1998; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

Educators and schools play vital roles in lives of students and families. Morrison, Brown, D'Incau, O'Farrell, and Furlong (2006) confirmed the need for students to have support from different people and institutions, especially schools. Schools should focus on strengths of students, while also taking deficiencies into consideration, and help support those strengths in hopes of compensating for weaknesses. Because so much time



is spent at school, educators must help increase protective factors in an effort to mitigate lack of support from home or other areas (Morrison et al., 2006). Klem and Connell (2004) added, “Studies show students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school. These students also are more engaged academically” (p. 262).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that little research exists exploring qualities of academically successful economically disadvantaged (ED) Caucasian students. Because much research exists focusing on negative variables that impede these students from being academically successful and eventually dropping out of high school, this study attempted to add to the body of research by focusing on the positive qualities that make academically successful students from one family resilient. Because this is a case study, only one family was included in the project. Also, the Caucasian group was the focus of the research because most current research addresses minority groups, such as African-Americans and Hispanics, and the Caucasian subgroup at the school in the study had the lowest graduation rate of all subgroups.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to examine academically successful ED students from one intact Caucasian family. No students of divorced or separated parents were included in this study. The mother and father of this family have only ever been married to each other, and all children are biologically both of theirs. By gathering information about how the family supports ED students, this study sought to describe the family variables that have positive impacts on this particular family’s students. The following areas were explored in hopes of sharing ideas with educators, parents, and students:

parental perception of students' success, student perception of their own success, and teacher perception of resilient ED students.

### **Focus and Intent**

The focus of this research project was the resilience of one family of Caucasian economically disadvantaged (ED) students who were academically successful in high school and the factors that fostered their success. By examining the family attitudes and routines of one resilient ED family, the researcher hoped that patterns would emerge to suggest why some students thrive while others flounder. Information gathered will hopefully help those families who wish to aid in the success of ED students, teachers who work with the students and families, and the students themselves through reflection of their actions, attitudes, and beliefs.

The intent of this project was to investigate the reasons for resilience in one family of Caucasian ED students. The goal was to draw conclusions in relation to actions that families can take to build better support systems for students. Hopefully, exploration of teacher and student perception will encourage thoughtful reflection about how to best serve these students and how the students perceive themselves.

### **Operational Definitions**

1. *Dropout* – For the purpose of this study, a dropout was considered to be any public high school student in grades 9-12 who did not complete the requirements of a Tennessee diploma within four years and a summer of entering ninth grade.

2. *Economically disadvantaged student* – A student who qualified for and received free or reduced lunch based on Income Eligibility Guidelines set forth by the National School Lunch Program of the US Department of Agriculture (US Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2008, p. 4).

3. *Income Eligibility Guidelines* – “the household size and income levels prescribed annually by the Secretary of Agriculture for determining eligibility for free and reduced price meals and for free milk. The free guidelines are at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines and the reduced price guidelines are between 130 and at or below 185 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines” (USDA, 2008, p. 4).

4. *Educational Resiliency* - “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 46).

5. *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR)* - “The AFGR is the number of regular diploma recipients in a given year divided by the average of the membership in grades 8, 9, and 10, reported 5, 4, and 3 years earlier, respectively” (Stillwell, 2010, p. 22).

### **Situation to Self**

This topic applied to the researcher personally because the researcher was the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Coordinator and worked with at-risk students, most of who were from low SES homes and considered to be ED by receiving free or reduced lunch. As the AYP Coordinator, part of this researcher’s job was to find ways to encourage and support ED students who were struggling academically and their families. The Caucasian group was specifically studied to suit the needs of the researcher’s student population. At the researcher’s school, the Caucasian ED group had a higher dropout rate than the African-American or Hispanic group.

The problem of ED students dropping out of high school is damaging to many groups, including the students themselves, the families of the students, the communities where they live, the schools they attend, and the society that must deal with a population

of undereducated citizens. Much literature supports the existence of the problem. Bost (2007) noted negative consequences for dropouts, including fewer post-secondary possibilities, being forced to live with parents, receiving welfare, or committing crimes for financial support. Between 1979 and 1995, people who did not graduate from high school saw the mean family income decline by 14%, but those who graduated from college experienced the opposite, a 14% increase (Children's Defense Fund, 2005).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) agreed that impact from dropping out is great and that billions of dollars are lost each year in potential income for the dropouts and spent in the form of benefits. Discovering variables that support ED students is within this researcher's range of influence. Ongoing research to find solutions to help students, daily interactions with students and families, and daily work with teachers who try to support students are parts of the researcher's job.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the writer in this research project:

**Research question 1.** *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?* Bridgeland et al. (2006) claimed parents only became involved with education when realizing the child was about to drop out. Seventy-one percent of students who dropped out of high school asserted that more parent involvement would have helped (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In a similar study, Gewertz (2006) discovered that 71% of students polled maintained the need for more parent involvement, better communication between school and parents, and parents ensuring attendance (Gewertz, 2006). Participants were interviewed to identify their beliefs about what was most significant in their children's lives and most important to their success.

**Research question 2.** *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?* McMillan and Reed (1994) observed that traits of successful at-risk students consisted of several qualities, including being intrinsically motivated and in control; wanting to succeed and being positive about the world; choosing to work hard and succeed; taking credit for success; being hopeful, positive, and optimistic about the future; and not blaming circumstances. Resilient at-risk students used time wisely by being involved in school and other activities. As far as family was concerned, successful at-risk students developed a bond of trust with at least one caregiver, not necessarily a parent (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Through interviews and surveys, the researcher obtained details about what the students believed supported their success the most.

**Research question 3.** *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED students to be resilient?* Because teachers play such a vital role in the success or failure of ED students, their beliefs about what enables some students to develop resilience are valuable. In a study conducted by Oswald, Johnson, and Howard (2003), secondary teachers were asked questions about items related to resilience in the areas of self, school, and family. Teachers' responses to what makes students resilient fell into two general categories: "personal predispositions" of the students themselves and the roles of the families (Oswald et al., 2003). The researcher interviewed teachers and examined a questionnaire about factors that the teachers felt are most important to enabling resilience.

### **Overview of the Study**

The study was qualitative in nature and employed a case study design by focusing on how parents, students, and teachers viewed resilience. Based on related literature

reviewed and the alignment with the research purpose, case study design was deemed most appropriate. In an attempt to holistically study human qualities, the researcher as human instrument interviewed participants in their natural settings of school and home. This qualitative case study used purposive sampling for the family with an emergent design. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen (2006) noted, “Qualitative inquiry shows a concern for context and meaning. It assumes that human behavior is context bound, that human experience takes its meaning from and, therefore, is inseparable from social, historical, political, and cultural influences” (p. 453).

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

Since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), pressure on schools to make sure students graduate on time has increased exponentially. Public education has become strapped with many different roles, some of which cannot be fulfilled by the school alone. Unfortunately, the consequences are punitive; schools are placed on lists that lead to eventual take over by the state if certain criteria are not met. Graduation rate is one of the hardest areas for schools to meet.

In Tennessee, cohort group completion determines the graduation rate. Whoever enters a school in the ninth grade must graduate with a regular education diploma within four years and a summer. This formula does not take any exceptions into consideration. Students, regardless of being in special education classes, transient, or out-of-state transfers, either earn the credits and pass the mandated standardized exams within four years and a summer or not. Of course, everyone wants every child to graduate on time with a regular diploma, but the hotly contested law has placed the public educational system in a difficult situation. In order to fulfill requirements of the law, schools and systems must recognize the factors that impede students from graduating on time and put programs into place to support students who are not being successful in school.

Downey (2008) commented, "There is little reason to doubt that students who live amid threatening and adverse environments encounter major obstacles in their path to academic success" (p. 62). Although many authors cite low SES as the primary factor in dropout rate, Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) established some overall trends

concerning dropouts, but concluded that no one factor predicted whether a student would be a dropout. They identified key risk factors including low socioeconomic status (SES), education level attained by parents, high disruptions in the family, number of siblings, mobility of family, and percentage not living with both parents. When multiple risk factors existed, predicting a dropout was more accurate (Hammond et al., 2007).

Anguiano (2004) based a study on data from The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 [NELS: 88] revealing four factors that affected school completion: two-parent families, parent involvement, parent education, and family income, all aspects of family life. Of the top 20 traits of dropouts identified by Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007), three at-risk groups included low SES, low academic achievement, and school suspensions. Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) studied early predictors of dropouts: family context issues, including attitudes and socialization practices of parents and stressful changes in family; children's personal resources, including behavior and attitude; and school experiences, including placements in tracks, grades, and test scores. These factors predicted dropping out independent of sociodemographic factors.

Lee and Burkam (2000) noted, "The most common explanations for dropping out focus on the personal characteristics of individual students" (p. 4). Three categories of factors emerged: student behaviors related to academics, such as class failures, truancy, and school engagement; student academic background, such as test scores and grade retention; and student social background, such as SES, family structure, gender, race/ethnicity, and urban residence (Lee & Burkam, 2000).

Carroll (1963) posed what was considered the first model of school learning. Three areas and their interactions were stressed: time needed to learn as opposed to time allowed to learn, motivation and ability, and quality of instruction (Carroll, 1963). In



addition to Carroll's model, Wiley and Harnischfeger (1974) included pupil and teacher variables in relation to backgrounds. Walberg (1981) proposed the Model of Educational Productivity that included four areas, including Student Ability, Student Motivation, Quality of Instruction, and Quantity of Instruction, and four supplementary factors, including Home Environment, School Environment, Peer Influence, and Mass Media.

In published research, the vast majority dealing with resilience of ED high school students focuses on the added effect of ethnicity. However, research tends to spotlight groups other than the Caucasian group, and the two groups studied the most are the African American and Hispanic groups. Arroyo and Zigler (1995) studied the concept of "racelessness" proposed by Fordham and Ogbu (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), which suggested that African American students who are academically successful distance themselves from their own culture and adopt attitudes and behaviors of other cultures.

Arroyo and Zigler (1995) noted how students' racial identity affected their behavior and attitude and cited a deficiency in current research: "It is impossible to identify variables that differentiate high achievers from low achievers or to address whether African Americans are fundamentally different from other adolescents unless appropriate comparison groups are included in the research design" (p. 904). This study attempted to address the Caucasian group because it is the least studied subgroup in the area of resilience and ED students and was the subgroup with the lowest graduation rate at the school involved in the study.

### **Family Factors**

Many studies and bodies of research about dropouts emphasize the importance of family context (Astone & McLanahan, 1991, 1994; Rumberger et al., 199). Fergusson

and Lynskey (1996) conducted a study in New Zealand of 940 children to the age of 16. Children who were resilient were found to have experienced great family adversity, including economic, parental, and social. Parenting has been found to play a major role in mitigating a child's high-risk background; a nurturing relationship with at least one parent greatly impacts the ability of a child to overcome adverse family life (Bradley et al., 1994; Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Wyman, Cowen, Work, & Parker, 1991).

**Family structure.** Family structure impacts the ability of a student to be resilient and finish school. The definition of what a family is has changed over the centuries. Bronislaw Malinowski (1913) believed that the nuclear family (mother, father, and their children) had to be universal because it filled the basic biological need to care for and protect babies and young children. He stressed that no culture could survive unless the birth of children was linked to both mother and father in legally based parenthood (Malinowski, 1913). George Murdock (1949) added to the idea that the nuclear family is both necessary and universal: "Whether as the sole prevailing form of the family . . . or as the basic unit from which more complex families form, [the nuclear family] exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society . . . . It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults" (p. 2). However, the family structure and idea of the nuclear family has changed dramatically.

According to Ellwood and Jencks (2001), the change in family structure and the change in society have produced unequal income for families: "Marriage is being postponed and sometimes being eschewed entirely. Cohabitation is up. Divorce has risen. Single parenthood has grown" (p. 6). The growth of single parents has prompted the increase of children being raised in poverty due to lower family incomes. The odds

of being a single parent increase or decrease according to the level of maternal education. In the 1960's, a 25-34-year-old woman in the bottom third of the education distribution could expect to be a single parent 7% of the time; that percentage has drastically increased to 20% today. In contrast, the same aged woman in the top third of the education distribution could expect to be a single parent only 5% of the time, a percentage that has remained relatively constant (Ellwood & Jencks, 2001).

Educational achievement is affected when students live with only one parent (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003; Rumberger, 2004; Shaw, 1979). Family background characteristics associated with significant risk factors for dropouts found by Hammond et al. (2007) include “not living with both natural parents” (p. 4). Children from fractured families are generally not as academically successful as those from intact families, but characteristics of parents, such as level of education, impact achievement more than the structure of the family (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005).

Amato (2005) studied differences between children in homes with only one biological parent and those living with both biological parents. After assessing “the effects of family formation on children” (Amato, 2005, p. 75), Amato suggested that family structure affects children through their adult lives and that children in homes with both biological parents have many advantages that those who live with only one parent do not. Some of the advantages gained by children with both parents included fewer stressful circumstances, a higher SES, emotional closeness to both parents, and more effective parenting; however, some children in the ideal family structure are exposed to many stressful conditions, including poor parenting, due to high parental conflict (Amato, 2005).

Amato recognized that family structure is only one contributor to emotional and social issues and that quality parenting is paramount to a child's social and emotional well being. Because single-parent families may struggle more by having fewer financial resources and by bearing the burden of raising the children alone, poor parenting skills resulting from those stressors negatively affect children; one of those negative effects is poor academic achievement (Amato, 2005).

Family structure consists not only of who is in the family, but also how large or small the family is (sibship size). Larger families, especially those in the low SES category, have smaller space per person, and this can cause more stress (Wagner, Schubert, & Schubert, 1986). Cherian's 1990 study took research that indicated a negative relationship between academic success and number of children from both intact and broken families and examined whether or it was true in Transkei. Findings indicated that children from smaller families exceed academically to children in large families, but whether the family was intact or broken did not correlate (Cherian, 1990).

A negative relationship between number of children and academic success has been found (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Downey, 1995). Blake (1981) deemed the effect of size of the family is greater than SES of the father, community of the home, and parental structure. Powell and Steelman (1993) went further to state that number of children affects graduation and college status and supersedes race, gender, parental structure, and SES.

Blake (1981) is credited with coining the term *resource dilution*, family resources divided among children that drive intellectual development. When a family has more children, the resources are diluted. Resources include economic, emotional, and social areas (Blake, 1981). Xu (2008) also noted that children from large families generally

have a lower level of academic achievement due to resources in the home, both financial and time, being split among many children.

Using the 1988 NELS, Downey (1995) investigated the dilution model with 24,599 eighth graders. Findings supported the dilution model: as the number of children increases, resources decrease.

Furthermore, a combination of interpersonal and economic resources successfully mediates the effect of sibship size on educational performance, explaining it entirely in the cases of grades and scores on standardized math tests. Thus, either parental resources, or something highly correlated with parental resources, is largely responsible for the lower educational performance of children in large versus small families. (Downey, 1995, p. 758)

Although many studies corroborate the resource dilution model, some do not. A study by Guo and VanWey (1999a) claimed that increased sibship size actually increased math scores. After “controlling for the additional family and other environmental effects, genetic effects . . . child-specific effects, and the interactions between child and family effects” (p. 182), Guo and VanWey (1999a) surmised that the size of the family does not negatively affect intellectual development. Furthermore, “limiting family size does not lead to children with a higher level of intellectual development” (Guo & VanWey, 1999a, p. 184).

In reaction to conclusions presented by Guo and VanWey, Downey, Powell, Steelman, and Pribesh (1999) claimed that Guo and VanWey “fail to construct a convincing case against the longstanding view that sibship is negatively and causally linked to intellectual development” (Downey et al., 1999, p. 197). In response to Downey et al. (1999), Guo and VanWey (1999b) deemed that the comments by Downey

et al. “failed to undermine our original challenge to the long-held view that sibship size is negatively and causally related to children’s intellectual development (p. 205).

Interestingly enough, Wagner, Schubert and Schubert (1986), nearly 13 years prior to the argument between Downey et al. and Guo and VanWey, acknowledged that family size is hard to pinpoint as an actual cause to achievement or the lack of it: “Of all the sibship-variable effects, those of family size are the most difficult to isolate” (Wagner et al., p. 66).

**Family socioeconomic status.** A student’s SES has a profound impact on academic achievement (Caldas, 1993; Majoribanks, 1996; McNeal, 2001; Rumberger & Willms, 1992). Low SES has been linked to a lack of language skills, reading skills, and letter recognition skills (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008), while children from higher SES homes had better basic math skills than those from lower SES homes (Coley, 2002). Issues associated with lagging skills caused low SES students to enter high school 3.3 grade levels behind others and to learn less over a four-year period than their higher SES counterparts, equating to a 4.3 grade level deficit upon graduation (Palardy, 2008).

When discussing the effects of SES on academic achievement, Duncan and Magnuson (2005) recognized that the mere fact of more money does not increase achievement. However, higher income opens more doors for children to thrive, such as better health care and nutrition, better learning environments, better communities in which to live, and better schools. Parent involvement, sibship size, and SES have all been found to affect academic achievement, and all of these areas are under the umbrella of family background (Majoribanks, 1996). Children who are a part of a small sibship have access to more resources than those in a large family, and more resources lead to higher academic achievement (Eamon, 2005; Majoribanks, 1996). McNeal (2001)

concluded that SES overrides other influences on education, even parent involvement.

Conger, Rueter, and Conger (2000) proposed the Family Stress Model, which contends that poverty, including economic pressure, and low income, puts extreme strains on relationships between spouses, increases depression, and makes families dysfunctional. The lack of money creates many problems, and these problems put added stress on the parents; the results of this distress may lead to less effective parenting, including added hostility toward the children, lack of support and warmth for the children, and loss of control of the children. Heightened levels of family stress due to low SES may lead to ineffective parenting practices, which may lead to emotionally maladjusted children. Outcomes for the children may include low self-esteem, depression, and aggression (Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993).

Hart and Risley (1995) found that children of professionals are exposed to more words per hour than children of the working class, who are exposed to more words per hour than children of low SES. This leads to a larger vocabulary, which may later lead to increased academic success. The study conducted by Hart and Risley (1995) for two and a half years suggests that the level of a child's exposure to language and vocabulary through conversation is related to the family's socioeconomic class.

The positive correlation between SES and standardized test scores, such as the SAT, has not only been of interest in the research community, but also in the public at large (Zwick & Green, 2007). Kohn (2001) proposed that the SAT verbal sections measure "the size of students' houses" (p. B12), while Sacks (1997) stated, "one can make a good guess about a child's standardized test scores simply by looking at how many degrees her parents have and at what kind of car they drive" (p. 27). Rothstein

(2004) added that SAT scores are not neutral in regard to SES.

All of the factors associated with low SES are unalterable by the student. The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition [NCSET] (2004) summarized research indicating two types of variables that affect dropouts: status and alterable. Status variables include factors that cannot be changed by the student. Those variables consist of age, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, native language, region, household mobility, ability, disability, parent employment, school size, and family structure. Being part of a low SES family is considered a status variable. This translates into increased risk of dropping out of high school due to factors, and complications of those factors, that the student cannot control (NCSET, 2004).

### **Parental Involvement and Support**

Parents play a key role in the education of their children. In colonial times, societal expectations were placed on parents to take part in school governance, teacher selection, curriculum support, and support for religious teachings (Hiatt, 1994). During the late 1800's and early 1900's, these types of parental involvement expectations began to change, and home life and school life became more separated. With the inception of some federal laws, including No Child Left Behind and Title I, parent involvement has been stressed more, as has getting input from parents on curriculum. Some schools even practice site-based management where school officials govern schools, community members are active participants, and parents help write policies and establish curriculum goals (Chavkin, 1998).

Children's academic success and parental involvement has been correlated (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Taylor, 1996). Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) proposed that parental involvement has three dimensions: behavioral,



personal, and cognitive. Parents' participation in children's school activities defines behavioral involvement. Parents' interest in children's academics defines personal involvement. Children's exposure to stimulating material and activities by parents defines cognitive involvement. Children's academic achievement has also been associated with parental expectations (Frome & Eccles, 1998).

A lack of parent involvement is a complication associated with low SES students and increases the risk of students dropping out of school ("Characteristics of At-Risk Students," 1992; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Patrikakou, 2000). If only one parent is in the home, naturally, the opportunities for parent involvement are limited simply due to the fact that two people can be involved more than one. According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), a higher income level meant more parental involvement, which "fosters more positive attitudes toward school, improves homework habits, reduces absenteeism and dropping out, and enhances academic achievement" (p. 23).

Patrikakou (2004) discerned that as children progress in school, parent involvement decreased. Using data from NELS: 88, the author examined students beginning in the eighth grade through the twelfth grade. Research findings included the following: the higher the parental expectations, the higher the academic achievement; the higher the child's belief of parent expectations, the higher the academic achievement; and the more time spent on homework, the higher the academic achievement (Patrikakou, 2004).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) synthesized 51 studies and found that, although middle-class, white students tended to have the most involved families, studies have shown support from every race, ethnicity, and SES. Studies proved that students with involved parents attended school consistently, chose higher-level classes, had higher test

scores and grades, exhibited better social skills, graduated, and went to college (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Without caring family and relationships of trust, adolescents do not thrive (The Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). The family involvement process consists of parenting, home-school relationships, and responsibility for learning, including homework management by parents, high expectations from parents, and encouragement about school and college from parents (The Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). Vallerand, Fortier, and Guay (1997) expounded that a child's perception of parents' support influenced staying in or leaving school. In particular, the emotional support given by the mother is essential to the child's achievement (Vallerand et al., 1997).

In a study of 105 average achieving students and 205 low achieving students conducted by Casanova, Garcia-Linares, Torre, and Carpio (2005), family characteristics and sociodemographic factors were examined in light of parental involvement. Family characteristics included involvement, control, expectation, and acceptance; sociodemographic factors included family structure, socioeconomic status, number of children in the family, and birth order of the children. Parental involvement in school activities was assessed using a scale based on the dimensions described by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994). The scale contained 22 items referring to three areas: behavioral involvement, personal involvement, and cognitive involvement. In the group of average achieving students, sociodemographic variables predicted achievement better. In the group of low achieving students, family variables predicted achievement better. Casanova et al. (2005) confirmed "the importance of family variables in relation to students' academic achievement" (p. 433).

Barge and Loges (2003) found themes of most helpful forms of parental

involvement and least helpful forms of parental involvement from students' perspectives. Three themes emerged as most helpful forms of parental involvement: helping with homework, interacting with schools, and encouraging students. Least helpful forms of parental involvement noted by students included poor communication with the students, being critical, inappropriate punishment, and making disparaging remarks about education to the students. Responses by students, teachers, and parents regarding high-quality parent involvement revealed two themes: cultivating positive relationship with teachers and monitoring academic progress (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Fox, Kiser, and Couch (2006) gathered 10,976 usable responses from Tennessee juniors and seniors. Of external factors, 5.8% of respondents claimed little or no support from home. Students who lacked strong support at home were more than 6 times as likely to say that education was not important to having more job choices, earning more money, and getting a job to those who had parental support (Fox et al., 2006).

Parental involvement at school and parental support at home can be divided into two areas. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) considered that parental involvement at school might have public and private benefits. The student of the parent involved at school directly benefitted from the involvement, but public effects also existed that included benefits to other children at school, administrators, and teachers. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) deemed those effects as being an effect of "school input" (p. 34).

Parental involvement changed depending upon the ages of the student. For younger students, more direct help is needed from parents to build appropriate foundations. For older students, involvement moved toward activities that promoted autonomy and independence. Therefore, for older students, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) maintained, "[P]arental involvement in the home is significantly more effective

than parental involvement in the school . . . . A little parental involvement in school might go a very long way as a conduit of information . . . . The effect of this basic level of in-school parental involvement might be as an essential lubricant for at-home involvement” (p. 35-36).

The importance of at-home, parent-child relationships has been researched and stressed repeatedly. Schaefer (1959) analyzed parental behavior and defined two dimensions: (1) warmth opposed to hostility, and (2) control opposed to autonomy. Becker (1964) delineated two analogous dimensions: (1) warmth/acceptance opposed to hostility/rejection, and (2) restrictiveness opposed to permissiveness. In 1983, Maccoby and Martin also noted two areas of parent-child relations: (1) accepting/ responsive/child-centered opposed to rejecting/unresponsive/ parent-centered, and (2) demanding/controlling opposed to undemanding/low control. Although the titles of areas are different, two themes emerged: emotional support given by parents and control imposed by parents (Amato, 1990).

Tenenbaum, Porche, Snow, Tabors, and Ross (2007) hypothesized that the parents’ emotional support and encouragement of the child’s autonomy affected academic achievement. The fact that mothers were “emotionally enabling and encouraged autonomous decision-making when children were eleven years old predicted whether children dropout out of high school” (Tenenbaum et al., 2007, p. 233). These studies found a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages (Tenenbaum et al., 2007).

Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan and Fenstermacher (1997) contended that parental

behavior and attitudes were more important than SES to academic achievement. They added, “Based on the research during the past 15 years, we conclude, as have others, that the degree to which families support students' learning contributes to the educational status of children” (Christenson et al., 1997, para. 9). Likewise, after reviewing 66 studies, books, reports, and reviews, Henderson and Berla (1994) concluded that “the family makes critical contributions to student achievement, from earliest childhood through high school. Efforts to improve children's outcomes are much more effective if they encompass their families” (p. 14).

In research conducted by Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008), 96 men and 83 women were tracked from birth until age 23; all participants were born to low SES mothers and were born first in the family. The students who were expected to graduate and did had higher levels of parental involvement and had better relationships with their parents than the group who unexpectedly dropped out of high school. Parental behavior was a major determinant of whether a child stayed on track to achieve academic success. Findings suggested that successful students relied heavily on their parents for support, while students who had the ability to succeed but no parent support diverted to failure (Englund et al., 2008).

### **Parental Level of Education**

Another complication of being a student from a low SES family with increased risk of not finishing high school is the level of education attained by the parents. Many authors agree that, as far as the family domain is concerned, one significant risk factor is this lack of parent education (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger, 1988). In addition, studies revealed that a child's test scores, grades, graduation, and college rates increased as the mother's education level increased

(Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents with more education have children who score higher on academic achievement tests than children of less educated parents, but parents' education level is hard to isolate as the reason for children's higher test scores (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Tenenbaum et al. (2007) maintained that mother's level of education, family income, and family structure were great predictors of high school dropouts.

According to Noack (2004), the level of education of parents is a good predictor of a child's academic success. The level of parental education has many influences on the child's education. These influences can be seen through an increase in opportunities for the child, through attitudes and beliefs about education being transferred to the child, and through the actual teaching of skills and competencies. When children observe parents either involved in educational activities or in casual discussion about education, children are positively affected (Noack, 2004).

A prominent explanation of the link between a child's academic achievement and the parents' level of education is that parents, while in school themselves, discover something that influences ways they interact with and support children's learning in the home (Davis-Kean, 2005; Eccles, 1993; Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2000). Naturally, an advanced education should increase parental skills and knowledge about educational systems and how they work; this enhances a parent's ability to intercede on a child's behalf and become an advocate within the system, educational practices in the home, and skills to model for children. Young children who have more educated parents receive more language and reading skills in the home, which helps to increase reading and language skills through childhood (Hoff, 2003).

In a longitudinal study of 463 youths enrolled in seventh through eleventh grade, Hill et al. (2004) discovered that higher educated parents' involvement with academics

translated to better child behavior in school. The better behavior translated to higher achievement and higher goals set by the child. In the group of parents with lower education levels, involvement produced higher goals set by the child but not better behavior or academic achievement (Hill et al., 2004). These higher educated parents also ensured that their children had rich educational opportunities within the community, such as music lessons and summer camps (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

Kohl, Lengua, and McMahon (2000) argued that the degree to which parents feel comfortable talking to teachers and the degree to which parents view their own roles as teachers to their own children is a direct reflection of how the parents view their own education and educational experience. Uneducated parents lacked confidence, vision, and competence to support their own children's education. Parent-teacher contact was positively related to parental education. More educated parents were more involved in their own children's education. On the contrary, parents who did not have as much education lacked skills and did not grasp the concept of being teachers to their own children as much as those parents with more education (Kohl et al., 2000).

Gary S. Becker (1964), economist and author of *Human Capital*, created a predictive model showing a positive correlation between earnings and academic achievement. According to this theory, level of education predicts level of productivity, which predicts level of earnings (Becker, 1964). Based on the signaling hypothesis, others hypothesized that the level of education does not necessarily predict the level of productivity, but educational attainment suggests that a person is productive because he/she had enough perseverance finish school; this suggests to others that productivity is possible. Skills learned through being in and finishing school are attractive to employers;

therefore, they pay people with higher education more than those who have not achieved the same level of education (Hamermesh & Rees, 1993).

Level of education and income are highly correlated, “one of the best-documented relationships in economics” (Ashenfelter & Rouse, 2000, p. 89). Because education improves work skills, productivity increases and reflects income. Thus, level of education determines social position (Ashenfelter & Rouse, 2000). In 2006, the event dropout rate of students from low-income families, defined here as the lowest 20 percent of all families, was approximately 4.5 times greater than those students whose families earned in the top 20 percent of all family incomes (Laird, Cataldi, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2008). Consequently, a snowball effect occurs.

A one-parent home earns less money than a two-parent home; an uneducated parent earns less money than an educated one, has less time for involvement, has fewer employment opportunities, and is forced to live in a poorer community with disadvantaged schools. According to Sirin (2005), “parents’ location in the socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on students’ academic achievement” (p. 418), because income level helps determine SES, which determines the school, environment, home resources, communication between home and school, and rank in society.

Parent education and student academic achievement are indirectly linked due to the impact of education level and family income on which communities the family can afford to live in and what jobs the parents are qualified to have (Eccles, 2005). Also, level of education influences whom people marry; hence, a higher educated woman may marry at or above her educational level. The family home in a good neighborhood with good schools is directly impacted by family income. Educational opportunities may



increase in more affluent schools, and risks to children may decrease (Furstenberg et al., 1999).

When examining how parental education levels affect the children and academic success, Hauser-Cram (2009) recognized that the mere amount of education is not the issue. Moreover, the academic situation of the children comes from a series of events in their parents' lives that form a cycle. Low educational levels cause many stressors in parents' lives, which feed the cycle. The most important thing is to find ways to break the cycle, and this is a much larger issue than family processes (Hauser-Cram, 2009).

### **Parent and Family Routines**

Adults seem to have patterns and routines to their parenting, but Morrison (2009) contended, "that an individual parent's behavior on a single dimension will vary perhaps widely as a function of at least four major factors: domain, history, time, and surprises" (p. 371). First, different domains, or areas, of family life may elicit different reactions from parents. For example, if a child excels at academics, the parent may be more relaxed and responsive; however, in an area that causes the child a problem, such as eating too much, the parent may be more direct and less warm. Second, a parent may show inconsistencies, depending upon the immediate history, such as being less firm about schedules if the child has been sick. Third, a parent may react at different times of the day, such as being hurried and short in the early morning and relaxed and warm in the evening. Last, a parent might react unevenly to surprises, such as having to unexpectedly pick up a child after school due to an emergency (Morrison, 2009).

McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) reviewed research performed at the University of Wisconsin as part of the Family Stress, Coping and Health Project. Family rituals were found to be important to the continuity of family life, identity, and bridging the gap

between past and present. Four Rhythmic family types were examined: Unpatterned Families, Intentional Families, Structuralized Families, and Rhythmic Families, which have the highest occurrence of tradition and celebration. Unfortunately, the number of Rhythmic Families decreases as the children age, and the number of Unpatterned Families increases. The Regenerative Family unit also has four types of families: Vulnerable Families, Secure Families, Durable Families, and Regenerative Families, which have the highest coping ability due to trust, faith, and emotional stability (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988).

Two propositions led the 1988 McCubbin and McCubbin study of families who are considered resilient:

Proposition I: In the face of normative stressors, transitions, and strains, the resilient family unit has and utilizes effectively those instrumental and expressive resources within the family system to protect the system from deterioration or breakdown and to promote adjustment to the situation.

Proposition II: In the face of non-normative stressors, transitions, strains, and crises (including catastrophes), the resilient family unit has, creates, and utilizes effectively those instrumental and expressive resources within and outside of the family system to protect the system from deterioration or breakdown and to promote adaptation to the situation. (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988, p. 248)

Although family rituals and routines have the commonality of involving two or more members of a family and being repetitive practices, Spagnola and Fiese (2007) delineated the two practices. Whereas routines do not hold special meanings and require small amounts of time, rituals help define what it means to be a member of the family or group, require more time, and have continuity. Rituals encourage emotional connections

among family members, which build bonds of trust that promote healthy family interactions. Also, daily routines associated with behavior monitoring encourage academic success because parents are aware of the child's homework; behavior monitoring in a routine basis discourages risky behavior, as the child knows that the parents are paying attention to actions (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007).

### **Qualities of Resilience**

In response to risk factors, "A protective factor is a trait, situation or circumstance that acts as a means for the individual to be resilient and a risk factor decreases that person's ability to be resilient" (Joondalup District Education Office, 2000, p. 4).

Resilient children who overcome multiple risk factors do have protective factors that mitigate their problems, while children who are at risk and unable to overcome multiple risk factors lack protective factors. For example, resilient adolescents often score higher on IQ tests, have higher intelligence, and have better problem solving abilities (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Masten et al., 1988; Werner, 1987). These young people also had a supportive adult outside the family and/or were involved in interests outside the family (Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Werner, 1987). In addition, resilient adolescents thrive when the parental figure or adult outside the family has high expectations for the student (Garmezy, 1985; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Three areas of protective factors emerged from Werner's 1955 Kauai Longitudinal Study: factors within the person, factors in the family, and factors in the community (Werner, 2005). As subjects matured from birth to 40 years of age, Werner classified some of their personal protective factors as being good natured and responsive, having ample self-help skills, being better readers, having talents that made them proud, having higher expectations of self and realistic plans, and having "a belief in their own

effectiveness and a conviction that the problems they confronted could be overcome by their own actions” (Werner, 2005, p. 12). Family protective factors included a close bond with at least one competent and caring adult, not necessarily a parent. Resilient boys had homes with structure and a male role model who encouraged emotional expression; resilient girls had homes with supportive female role models who emphasized independence. These families had stability and values reported to be associated with religious beliefs. In the community, factors that helped protect against risks involved subjects relying on community members, such as teachers, neighbors, friends’ parents, church groups, and ministers, for support (Werner, 2005).

The Education Department of Western Australia (Joondalup District Education Office, 2000) noted four areas, community, family, school, and the young person, that have risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors decrease resilience and increase vulnerability, while protective factors increase resiliency and decrease vulnerability. These factors affect physical health, emotional and social development, and academic achievement. According to research conducted by the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA), a resilient individual has five main personal traits: positive problem solving skills, functional coping styles and strategies, confident optimism, self-efficacy, and a high sense of worth. Four areas make a young person resilient: awareness and empathy of others, willingness and capacity to plan, good communication and social skills, and good teacher/school bonding (Joondalup District Education Office, 2000).

In a study of 205 children in grades 3-6, Masten et al. (1988) noted, “If outcome under stress is better than expected, one interprets an attribute as ‘protective’; if it is worse than expected, one interprets the attribute as a ‘vulnerability’ factor” (p. 749). Socioeconomic status can be a protective factor or a vulnerability factor. Findings

included “the relation of stress exposure to competence in middle childhood may vary as a function of child characteristics and family background characteristics, and according to the criterion of competence itself” (Masten et al., 1988, p. 759).

Howard and Johnson (2000) studied how resilient and non-resilient at-risk students dealt with problems, did or did not have protective factors, and if demographics, such as location, ethnicity, and SES, had effects on their coping strategies. They found that resilient and non-resilient students talked very differently about their lives and themselves. For example, resilient students talked with pride about accomplishments, expressed that they belonged and felt connected to others, believed they had control over their lives, were self-reflective, and had positive plans for the future. On the other hand, non-resilient students thought their teachers ignored them or favored others over them, did not seem to be attached to others, blamed others and felt like victims, spoke of conflict, and were more apprehensive about the future (Howard & Johnson, 2000).

When protective factors produce positive outcomes, they are called promotive factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors are external resources, such as parental support, community-based groups, and parent support, or internal assets, such as self-efficacy, the ability to cope, and the presence of competence. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) added, “Using assets or resources to overcome risks demonstrates resilience as a process,” and “external resources can be a focus of change to help adolescents face risks and prevent negative outcomes (p. 400). When adolescents are faced with low risks but a positive outcome occurs, they are considered to have normative development. When adolescents are faced with high risks but have positive outcomes, resilience theory is noted. Low risk that produces negative outcomes is considered to have inadequate risk assessment, and risk models are built around

adolescents who have high risk and negative outcomes. Table 1 depicts how risks and outcomes interact (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Table 1

*Risks and Outcomes*

	Low Risk	High Risk
Positive outcome	A (normal development)	B (resilience theory)
Negative outcome	C (inadequate risk assessment)	D (risk models)

The 1998 study by Catterall delineated two areas of resilience: commitment resilience and academic resilience. A subsample of approximately 4,000 students in eighth grade included those who did not feel they would finish high school (commitment resilience), and a subsample of approximately 7,000 eighth graders identified those who made C's or lower in English from sixth to eighth grades (academic resilience); the subsamples were taken from the NELS: 88. Resilient students reported being involved in extracurricular activities, having family support, having family rules about how much television is allowed, and feeling safe in school (Catterall, 1998).

An extensive study by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Grotberg, 1995) interviewed 589 children from 30 countries in an effort to compile a list of behaviors that promote resilience. As a result, Grotberg of The International Resilience Project has outlined three sources of resilience. External supports, titled "I HAVE," include trusting relationships, structure and rules at home, role models, encouragement to be autonomous, and access to needed services.

Internal supports, titled "I AM," include the resilient child who feels lovable and

has an even temperament; is loving, empathic, and altruistic; is proud of him/herself; is autonomous and responsible; and is filled with hope, faith, and trust. Social and interpersonal skills, titled “I CAN,” include skills that resilient children think they can accomplish to promote their own success; these actions are communicate, problem solve, manage feelings and impulses, gauge personal temperament and that of others, and see trusting relationships (Grotberg, 1995).

One focus of research concerns students’ beliefs about personal ability. Schunk (1984) noted that students who were successful in school had a greater sense of self-efficacy, while Marsh (1987) suggested success came from strong self-esteem and academic self-concept. In response to research in this area, many companies began producing curriculum to build self-esteem in hopes of helping students be more academically successful. Part of the issue lies around the question of which comes first: does success breed self-esteem, or does self-esteem breed success? Subsequent research found self-concept related to academics to be content specific, such as beliefs about math ability impacting math success but not English success (Marsh & Yeung, 1997).

Academic achievement is also impacted by personal motivation, and many things affect a student’s level of motivation, such as depression, a lack of information, a lack of skill sets, or a lack of support from family. According to McEvoy and Welker (2000), a student who has accurate information about career avenues and requirements for graduation is more motivated, more likely to aspire to higher ideals, and less likely to fail academically. A student who lacks adequate peer relations or social skills to develop peer relations may lack motivation to be at school and is at risk for academic failure (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). If a student has internal conflict or believes that peers and teachers do not like him/her, that student lacks motivation and is at risk of academic

failure (Altenbaugh, 1998).

Many motivational and self-concept theories exist in relation to persistence. Phillips (1984) posited that teachers viewed students with low self-concept in academics as lacking in persistence when compared to those with the same ability level but higher self-concept in academics. Vallerand et al. (1997) noted that students who were persistent viewed themselves as more competent than their peers who dropped out of school. In a 10-year longitudinal study of SES, academic self-concept, family structure, and academic achievement as they relate to education attainment level of a child, Guay, Larose, and Boivin (2004) concluded that self-concept about academics was a better predictor of educational attainment level than prior academic achievement and was still significant when SES, family structure, and academic achievement were controlled.

Masten et al. (1990) noted a sense of purpose and belief in having a future and usefulness as an internal assets, and Werner (1984) suggested that a sense of being responsible for tasks or people or pets helped promote a feeling of required helpfulness. Rutter (1984) described self-efficacy and esteem as “a feeling of your own worth . . . you can control what happens to you . . . . You are in fact master of your own destiny” (p. 60).

A study by Rouse (2001) examined 17 resilient and 19 non-resilient low SES students to find personal characteristics and beliefs of the students. The resilient students believed they had control over their school lives and believed in their own ability, but they only believed moderately in their environment (Rouse, 2001). After examining student descriptions of managing difficulties, Aronson (2001) added enabling factors of good teachers, caring adults and role models, a strong support system, and family support and coping strategies of spirituality and faith, positivity, perseverance, and resistance as



part of a framework of resilience.

Fuller (1998) identified four main areas that promoted well being in young people: the feeling of being loved by family, the feeling of belonging at school, being connected to peers, and the presence of an adult other than a family member who personally invests in them. The ability to cope well with stress and the resources available to the young person helped to determine their ability to adjust to risk factors. Further contributions to successful coping with stress included strategies for dealing with risk factors and support of friends and family in the face of adversity (Fuller, 1998).

Children and adults have very different perspectives: “A potential problem with research that assumes that all participants share the same definitions of risk and resilience is that policies and programmes will be developed that are based, with the best of intentions, on adult interpretations and perspectives” (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson, 1999, p. 318). If this is true, then definitions, programs, and policies on risk and resilience need to be based around the perspectives of the students, not necessarily the adults.

### **Teacher Roles and Perceptions**

Many studies of resilience cite the importance of positive relationships not only with one’s family, but also with other caring and competent people. Because students spend so much time at school with teachers, the attachments are very important. Masten (2009) noted, “[S]chools, along with families, play a central role in nurturing all the tools of resilience” (p. 30). Teachers, as well as parents, help young people learn skills of self-control over behavior, emotion, and attention while they are helping them to develop intellectual capacity. Hence, teachers and schools assist students in developing resilience (Masten, 2009). Many studies have also delineated the importance of teachers’ roles in the lives of resilient students (Geary, 1988; Werner & Smith, 1987).

Although student and family characteristics are often explored in research related to dropouts, Lee and Burkam (2000) focused on the school characteristics of structure, curriculum, and relationships between teachers and students and how those characteristics influenced risk factors. The findings included, “Students attending schools with more positive student-teacher relations are less likely to drop out than those who attend schools with less positive student-teacher relations” (Lee & Burkam, 2000, p. 24). When a school’s demographics and students’ backgrounds were removed from the equation, students still stayed in school due to their positive relationships with their teachers. However, this student-teacher relationship premise did not hold true when the enrollment of the school was greater than 1,500 students due to the inability to sustain these relationships (Lee & Burkam, 2000).

In a 3-year study of 789 adolescents that attended an urban high school in a low SES area, Solberg, Carlstrom, Howard, and Jones (2007) classified students into resilience groups. The most vulnerable group, Cluster 1, included 133 of the youth studied. These high-risk students reported “significantly lower connections with teachers” (p. 319) than students in all other clusters. One hundred twenty-four Cluster 2 students were labeled as vulnerable and reported “significantly lower connections with teachers” (p. 319) than three other student clusters. Cluster 3, numbering 149 students and deemed disengaged, reported lower connections with teachers than three other groups but did not show a significant difference (Solberg et al., 2007).

In contrast, resilient students, 71 total, made up Cluster 4 and reported “stronger connections with teachers and peers than three other clusters” (p. 320). Cluster 5, 186 students, was moderately resilient and reported higher connections with teachers than three other groups. The group titled not-at-risk was Cluster 6, numbering 146 students,

and this group noted the highest perceived family support and teacher connections than all other clusters (Solberg et al., 2007).

The quality of training of teachers is correlated with students' academic success (Gimbert, Bol, & Wallace, 2007). Interestingly, schools in low SES areas are less likely to employ high quality teachers. According to Ingersoll (1999), only 27% of teachers in low SES areas majored in math; 43% of teachers in higher SES areas majored in math.

Because sometimes perception is reality, interest lies in what others, especially teachers, perceive to be the reasons that some ED students are successful while others are not, especially because “[c]lassroom teachers are generally very skilled at identifying those students who are resilient” (Joondalup District Education Office, 2000, p. 7). Luthar (1991) reported that these students are seen as having internal control, are friendly, and have excellent social skills. Cognitive and academic superiority over those who are not successful dramatically aids the resilient ED students (Garmezy & Rutter, 1983; Winfield, 1991), as does being independent (Werner, 1990).

Teacher perception sometimes differs according to socioeconomic standing, and teachers generally deem students from ED families as having less ability to regulate themselves and being less mature (McLoyd, 1998). Variables that teachers associate with resilient students include having stable relationships with peers, good problem solving and thinking skills, realistic goals, sense of self-efficacy, some success, good communication skills, the ability to accept responsibility, and a strong attachment to at least one caring adult (Oswald et al., 2003).

According to Dimmit (2003), “Teacher beliefs and attitudes about their students and their jobs have considerable impact on the educational process” (p. 4). Student achievement is lessened when teachers have a high turnover rate, excessive absences,

and/or excessive lateness (Altenbaugh, 1998). McEvoy and Welker (2000) maintained that students are more likely to be academically successful when their teachers believe they are capable and competent.

### **School Roles**

Downey (2008) synthesized research in the area of educational resilience in the classroom context and found 12 recommendations for the classroom that can be organized into 4 areas: rapport between teachers and students, classroom climate, instructional strategies, and individual student skills. According to Downey (2008), teachers “possess the tools to introduce at-risk students of all ages to the life-changing experience of educational resilience” (p. 63).

A ground breaking, longitudinal study of 3,000 poverty-ridden students by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979) identified characteristics of schools that increased academic success even in the face of adversity. These characteristics included offering students opportunities to practice responsibility, problem-solving skills, and success; modeling positive behavior by teachers; praise and feedback; rewards and incentives; and high academic standards (Rutter et al., 1979).

School climate in general impacts everyone in the school building, and a positive school culture that emphasizes academics pushes students to do well (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). Part of a positive school culture is safety, physical and emotional (McEvoy & Welker, 2000), part comes from the school having adequate resources and an atmosphere of collaboration (Hilty, 1998), and part comes from being academically focused, such as comprehensive curriculum, school wide assessments, and intervention programs (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

According to Catterall (1998), schools can encourage resilience by supporting and

encouraging student participation in school-based activities, such as clubs and athletics. Although schools cannot control “individual predilection and family generated opportunities” (Catterall, 1998, p. 327), schools can support these activities with financial resources, scheduling, transportation, and incentives. Catterall (1998) did note, however, that these findings are hard to corroborate due to the question of whether participation in these activities leads to resilience or whether resilience leads to school activities.

Edmonds (1982) commented that a school has the power to create a positive climate that has more influence over students “than any single influence – teachers, class, family, neighbourhood . . . . It can override almost everything else in the lives of children” (p. 11). To add to this, Benard (1991) believed that a school, through high expectations and caring relationships, could also help develop resilience in students by fostering problem-solving skills and a sense of purpose.

### **Relationship to Research Genre**

Major characteristics of qualitative research include concern for context and meaning, natural settings, human instruments, descriptive data, emergent design, and inductive analysis interest (Ary et al., 2006). This case study had all of the qualitative characteristics. It focused on how parents, students, and teachers viewed resilience. In an attempt to holistically study human qualities, the researcher as human instrument interviewed participants in their natural settings of school and home.

Rich, descriptive data were generated from recorded and transcribed interviews, and the inquiry was understood to be value bound. Kvale (2006) observed, “[I]nterviews give voice to the many . . . the marginalized, who do not ordinarily participate in public debates, can in interview studies have their social situations and their viewpoints communicated to a larger audience” (p. 481). Because the researcher could not anticipate

the outcome, emergent design allowed the study to naturally unfold and change course, when needed. The data evolved from raw and summarized data, then to hypotheses, and then to theory (Ary et al., 2006). The study took the form of a case study, focusing on one intact Caucasian ED family with academically successful students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner (1977) posited that human development could only be understood by considering the ecological system in which the person develops and grows. The ecological paradigm of the 1970's presented by Bronfenbrenner was a reaction to the limited developmental theories of the time. Bronfenbrenner commented, "It can be said that much of the developmental psychology is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 513).

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecology of human development is not one of isolation; humans are in constant interactions with different environments. The first level is the microsystem, including the family, peers, culture, church, and school. The second level is the mesosystem, which is filtered through the microsystem, and includes social institutions. The exosystem is the interaction between two or more settings that affects the developing person. The macrosystem, the abstract areas of cultures and the most removed influence, contains the first three systems. Finally, the chronosystem includes the changes that happen over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The theory of ecology of human development is the umbrella covering development in a broad sense. More specifically, within this context is the theory of human resilience.

Human resilience has fascinated educators, social workers, sociologists, and psychologists for ages; many theorists have added different aspects over the years. In

early research, children who experienced compounded risks but managed to overcome those risks were labeled “invulnerable” (Anthony, 1974). Those thought to be “invulnerable” were able to adapt to new problems and issues, and research began to deem them “resilient,” a nod to include the ability to change and adapt to overcome obstacles (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982).

With the growing interest in resilience, many theorists began adding and tweaking definitions. Rutter (1990) described resilience as “the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity” (p. 181). Seccombe (2002) defined resilience as “a multifaceted phenomenon that produces the ability to thrive despite adversity” (p. 385). Waller (2001) defined it as “positive adaptation in response to adversity” (p. 292), while Werner and Smith (1982) deemed it as “capacity to cope effectively with the internal stress of vulnerabilities and external stresses” (p. 4). A study by Catterall (1998) diverged a bit from the traditional definition of resilience and characterized the phenomenon “as recovery from low performance or low commitment to school” (p. 317).

This study focused on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001, p. 1): “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity,” combined with the definition of Educational Resiliency by Wang et al. (1994), “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (p. 46).

Various definitions of resilience also generate lists of protective factors. Krovetz (1998) outlined protective factors of resilience theory that give successful students advantages, including factors of community, school, and family, while Bernard (1997)

distinguished four areas of individual traits, including a sense of purpose, autonomy, social competence, and the ability to solve problems.

Masten (2009) gave a "short list" of protective factors, including attachments to positive role models, feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, feelings of hope and meaningfulness of life, faith and religious affiliations, bonds to good schools, and supportive communities and cultures. Furthermore, "resilience does not require extraordinary resources in most cases, but instead is the result of what might be called 'ordinary magic'" (Masten, 2009, p. 30). When discussing resilience, three areas have become the focus: individual personality traits, family factors, and community factors (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982), and those three general areas were the focus of this study.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The problem is that little research exploring qualities of academically successful ED Caucasian students exists. Because much research exists focusing on negative variables that impede these students from being academically successful and eventually drop out of high school, this study attempted to add to the body of research by focusing on the positive qualities that make academically successful students from one family resilient. The purpose of this study was to examine academically successful ED students from one intact Caucasian family. By gathering information about how the family supports ED students, this study sought to describe the family variables that have positive impacts on this particular family's students. The following areas were explored in hopes of sharing ideas with educators, parents, and students: parental perception of students' success, student perception of their own success, and teacher perception of resilient ED students. This chapter will include the three research questions, design of the study, a description of the setting and participants, procedures, role of the researcher, and data analysis methods.

### Research Questions

The following questions guided the writer in this research project:

**Research question 1.** *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?*

**Research question 2.** *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?*

**Research question 3.** *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED*

*students to be resilient?*

## **Design**

This qualitative case study used purposive sampling for the family with an emergent design. Ary et al. (2006) noted, “Qualitative inquiry shows a concern for context and meaning. It assumes that human behavior is context bound, that human experience takes its meaning from and, therefore, is inseparable from social, historical, political, and cultural influences” (p. 453). Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) recognized, “[W]hen the object is concrete human experience, then qualitative methods are the most adequate means of knowledge production” (p. 162). Surveys and interviews during the study were scheduled to best meet the needs of the parents, students, and teachers, and the study was allowed to emerge naturally.

According to Yin (1994), case studies are a four-step process: designing the study, conducting the study, analyzing the evidence, and developing conclusions, recommendations, and implications. The design of this study took shape as different instructors and consultants helped hone the research questions and refine the sources of data. Yin (1994) suggested using multiple types of data sources to establish construct validity, such as documents, archival records, researcher observations, subject observations, interviews, and artifacts. This study used data from interviews of parents, students, and teachers, documents to establish academic records and grade patterns of students, and surveys of students and teachers.

Ary et al. (2006) listed eight key characteristics of qualitative case studies that aim to answer the basic question, “What are the characteristics of this particular entity, phenomenon, person, setting?” (p. 468). This study intended to explore the reasons students from one Caucasian economically disadvantaged (ED) family were academically

successful and resilient and to examine perceptions of this success through the eyes of parents, students, and teachers. The eight key characteristics of case studies (Ary et al., 2006) included focusing on a single unit (one family), having multidisciplinary roots (psychology and education), producing in-depth descriptions (through interviews), being anchored in real life (concern of resilience versus dropping out of high school is timely), providing descriptions of themes and issues (themes of resilience sought), using more than one data collection techniques (interviews, documents, and surveys), valuing the time spent with the family, and having the ability to combine with other types of qualitative approaches.

Stake (1995) added that three types of case studies exist. Intrinsic studies are completed when the researcher is interested in the case. Research from Instrumental studies explains more than obvious conclusions. Collective studies use more than one case study (Stake, 1995). Because the family chosen for this case study was an anomaly to the school and not consistent with the bulk of research on low SES and academic success, the researcher became interested in the family; hence, this study was an intrinsic case study.

Kvale (2006) defined an interview as “a meeting where a reporter obtains information from a person, as a meeting with another person to achieve a specific goal, and more generally, as a conversation with a purpose” (p. 483). The research interview is “specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation” (Kvale, 2006, p. 485).

Kvale (2006) also stated that qualitative interviews “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world. The interviews give voice to common people” (p. 481). Kvale (1996) presented the seven stages of a qualitative interview investigation (p. 88):

1. *Thematizing*: Formulate the purpose of the investigation and describe the concept of the topic to be investigated before the interviews start.
2. *Designing*: Plan the design of the study, considering all seven stages, before the interviews start.
3. *Interviewing*: Conduct the interviews with an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought.
4. *Transcribing*: Prepare the interview material to be analyzed, which usually includes a transcription from speech to text.
5. *Analyzing*: Decide, considering purpose and topic, which methods of analysis are appropriate.
6. *Verifying*: Establish the generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings.
7. *Reporting*: Communicate the findings and the methods in an appropriate form.

According to Roulston (2010), interviewing has six conceptions: neo-positivist, constructionist, post-modern, transformative, decolonizing, and romantic. The conception of interviews for this study was done in the romantic vein, “in which the interviewer (IR) is open about his/her interests in the research topic, and will readily express this within the interview setting when called upon by the interviewee (IE)” (Roulston, 2010, p. 217). Establishing “genuine rapport and trust” was important to the IR and the IE in order to produce an environment that was “intimate and self-revealing” (p. 217). In addition, Roulston (2010) commented, “[R]esearchers taking a romantic conception to interviewing strive to demonstrate that they are reflexive researchers, aware of their subjective positions in the relation to the research participants” (p. 218).

The gathering of data occurred between January 2010 and August 2010. Data

were collected for each question as follows:

**Research question 1.** *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?* To address this first research question, the writer interviewed the parents, transcribed the audio recordings, and found similarities and differences. At the first meeting, the researcher explained the intent of the study and had consent forms signed. Interview questions included the levels of education obtained by the parents, parent involvement, and daily routines but were semi-structured to allow the parents' questions and answers to lead the researcher's questions.

**Research question 2.** *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?* The researcher interviewed Students A-F separately as they are all high school age or older, audio taped the interviews, and transcribed them for accuracy of information. As themes and patterns emerged, the researcher coded and recoded as needed. Students G-H were asked lower level questions with the mother present due to the ages of those children. Follow-up interviews took place to clarify or extend any information in question. The researcher gave Students A-F an email address to further explain anything they felt necessary or to ask questions about the study.

The researcher gained consent from the Bernard van Leer Foundation to use the concepts I HAVE, I AM, and I CAN, to form a survey instrument for the students. They were asked to mark which identifiers apply to them, and rank the statements in each area from most important (5) to least important (1). The overall scores for each of the three areas was be averaged, compared, and analyzed.

**Research question 3.** *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED*

*students to be resilient?* This question was answered through interviews that were audio taped and transcribed for accuracy of information. Survey questions focused on perceptions about family factors, places, and characteristics to determine what teachers felt were important indicators of success of ED students. Statements were ranked from most important to least important, and totals for each item were averaged and compared to determine the most and least important characteristics.

### **Setting**

The site for this project was a school system in a suburb of Tennessee and the community that is zoned for the system in which the family lives. The site was chosen because the writer was employed as the AYP Coordinator in the system and had access to all preliminary data and student information that was relative to this project. Because part of the position included working with at-risk students and families, the writer had first-hand experience with ED issues that interfere with a student's graduation and variables that support a student's graduation. In addition, this site had maintained a graduation rate over 90% for the past three years, despite the growing percentage of ED students. During the 2009-2010 school year, the school became a Title I school for the first time, which shows the dramatic increase in the ED population.

In 2009, the high school population totaled 532 students in grades 9 through 12. The demographic description was as follows: 73.8% Caucasian, 21.6% African American, 4.1% Hispanic, and 0.6% Asian/Pacific Islander. Students who qualified for and received free or reduced lunch totaled 38.2%. Females accounted for 45.1% of the population, and males accounted for 54.9%. As noted on the 2009 Report Card, graduation rates lag one year in reporting, so the 90.5% rate that was reported on the 2009 Report Card was actually for the graduating class of 2008. The graduation rate for

the graduating class of 2009 was 95.9%. The attendance rate for 2009 was 95.8%, and the cohort dropout rate was 2.7%. The school has maintained a history of Good Standing for the NCLB status since 2005 (Tennessee Department of Education Report Card, 2009).

At this particular high school, unweighted GPAs for ED students were lower than those of all students combined. In the tenth grade, the GPA for all 144 students was 2.76829583, while the average for the 40 ED students was 2.0980275. In the eleventh grade, the GPA for all 134 students was 2.60120075, while the average for the 33 ED students was 2.42933636. In the twelfth grade, the GPA for all 125 students was 2.6486064, while the average for the 21 ED students was 2.07071429.

## **Participants**

The participants in this case study were from one Caucasian economically disadvantaged family of 10 that included resilient students who have all shown academic success. For this study, academic success was defined as a minimum un-weighted grade point average in high school of 3.2. An initial list of economically disadvantaged students was made, and the list was shortened by deleting any student who did not meet the un-weighted grade point average of 3.2. From this list, only children were excluded, which generated 3 families. Two of the families had only two children. The family chosen had eight children, which yielded a more consistent record of academic achievement. The intact consenting family consisted of a mother and father, neither of whom has been divorced, separated, or remarried, four females, and four males.

The family lived in the same reasonably sized house that they had always lived in; it was tidy and well-kept but small for so many people. The mother and father made the conscious decision for the mother to stay home, even though she had a four-year college degree, and for the father, who also had a four-year college degree, to be the only worker

outside the home. However, since the mother loved children so much, she kept other people's children in her own home. Small children seemed to flock to her, and she was the epitome of the calm mother, never in a hurry, always seeming to have time for everyone.

Ages of the children at the time of the study were 26, 23, 22, 20, 18, 15, 13, and 11, Students A-H, respectively. Students A-D were all males, and Students E-H were all females. Six of the eight children, or 75%, still lived at home with their parents. Of the two children who no longer lived at home, both were married and still in college, but neither had children. The two oldest males living at home were also still in college. The oldest female living at home planned to go to a community college after graduation. All other children noted college plans.

Because the focus of the study involved factors that positively affect completion of high school, the most prominent children studied were two females currently in high school, ages 18 and 15; the second most prominent group of children were the ones who had already graduated from high school, ages 26, 23, 22, and 20. Naturally, information from the parents also weighed heavily in analysis. All subjects in the family had good health status. For the purpose of this study, economically disadvantaged was defined as a student who qualifies for and receives free or reduced lunch based on Income Eligibility Guidelines set forth by the National School Lunch Program of the US Department of Agriculture (US Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2008).

## **Procedures**

The initial Application to Use Human Research Subjects (Expedited Review) was submitted to the Institution Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University on June 4, 2009. Comments from the IRB were sent to the researcher on July 6, 2009; revisions were made



and sent to the IRB on July 20, 2009. A lapse in communications occurred from July 20, 2009 until September 11 2009. The IRB Committee sent three points to be clarified to the researcher on September 11, 2009. After doing revisions under the direction of the Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Judy Shoemaker, the Application was sent to the IRB on October 11, 2009. Final approval from the IRB was obtained on October 19, 2009.

The purpose of this project was to study academically successful students from one intact Caucasian family. The case study of the family allowed for in depth, qualitative descriptions to ultimately determine what makes some ED students successful. For interviews, words and actions were the primary form of data gathered by human as instrument; hence, these parts were qualitative in nature. The survey research used questionnaires about characteristics, asking participants to rank items, but was secondary to the qualitative data. Because the surveys were deployed online using Zoomerang©, the data analysis was performed by Zoomerang© and included in the study. The combination of the two forms complemented each other and added different dimensions to the study.

Two surveys were utilized in the study, and both were distributed using Zoomerang©. The first survey (Appendix D) was administered to the eight students in the family being studied to determine their perceptions regarding their own academic success. This survey was based upon research conducted by The International Resilience Project of the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Grotberg, 1995). Permission to use the content of the research was granted on January 5, 2009 (Appendix C). The survey was reviewed by the Dissertation Committee led by Dr. Judy Shoemaker and was approved in the Application to Use Human Subjects by the IRB on October 19, 2009.

The second survey (Appendix F), also distributed by Zoomerang©, was sent to 40

certified teachers, 26 of whom volunteered to participate. This survey was very general and was based upon personal experience of the researcher and preliminary readings. Teachers included in the study were asked to respond to a survey that focused on perceptions about family factors, places, and personal characteristics to determine what teachers feel are important indicators of success of ED students. Statements were ranked from most important to least important, and totals for each item were averaged and compared to determine the most and least important characteristics. The survey was reviewed by the Dissertation Committee led by Dr. Judy Shoemaker and was approved in the Application to Use Human Subjects by the Institution Review Board on October 19, 2009

The family in the case study was chosen because their family characteristics fit the need of the study: intact Caucasian family with academically successful students who showed qualities of resilience in relation to being ED. After subjects agreed to be part of the study, they were informed of the steps involved and signed consent forms. The first three stages of the seven stages of an interview investigation proposed by Kvale (1996) were followed: Thematizing, Designing, and Interviewing.

The mother and father of the intact Caucasian family were interviewed separately, and those interviews were audio taped for later analysis. Specifically, the interview questions and answers were audio taped only, and no videotaping occurred. The interviews began with general questions about the parents, such as age and levels of education, but the researcher allowed the interviews to be very informal and allowed the parents to guide the topics freely. Ary et al. (2006) deemed the qualitative interview as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 480), and the probe and pause method was utilized. Transcriptions of parent interviews were produced and labeled Parent A and Parent B,

and this was the fourth stage of interview investigation (Kvale, 1996).

The parent interviews were conducted separately and transcribed. The transcriptions were labeled at Parent A (mother) and Parent B (father). Once both interviews were transcribed, the researcher began familiarization with the final goal of trying to answer Research Question 1: *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?* Categories found in the literature review were the focus: family factors (structure, SES, parental involvement, parental support, parental level of education, routines), resilience, teacher roles, and school roles. Colored highlighters were used to identify dialogue that supported these areas. Themes noted were Theme 1: Family Routines, Theme 2: Support, Theme 3: Values and Commitments, and Theme 4: Faith. Once information about these themes was gathered, analysis began.

The student subjects aged 20 and over and labeled Student A - D were interviewed by phone and audio taped with permission; notes were taken. The notes taken by the researcher included general information about age, education, and reasons for success, but the researcher allowed the adult subjects to guide the conversation. The audiotapes were reviewed and transcribed. The transcriptions were filed using labels of Student A, Student B, Student C, and Student D. The children between 11 and 18, labeled Student E – H, were interviewed and audio taped; no videotaping occurred. General questions about age, grade in school, future aspirations, and reasons for success were asked, but the interviews were informal enough to establish trust and allow the subjects to guide the conversations. The mother was present during interviews of the children ages 11 and 13. Transcriptions were filed using labels of Student E, Student F, Student G, and Student H.

Once all eight interviews were transcribed and the researcher had become familiar with the transcriptions, the researcher began trying to answer Research Question 2: *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?* Categories found in the literature review were the focus: personal qualities, family factors, and community factors. Colored highlighters were used to identify dialogue that supported these areas. Themes noted were Theme 1: Support from Parents, Theme 2: Support from Teachers, Theme 3: Support from Other Adults, Theme 4: Ideas about Unsuccessful Students, Theme 5: Ideas of Support and Faith, and Theme 6: Advice for Struggling Students. Once information about these themes was gathered, analysis began.

Teachers were also interviewed individually with a semi-structured script of 12 questions to guide the interview and to assess themes. Topics for interview questions were explored throughout coursework and research. Once a list of necessary topics was compiled, writing of individual questions began. The initial list of 14 questions was given to 21 teachers chosen by blind draw. The questions were placed with no identifiers in teacher mailboxes with a request for feedback on clarity, validity, and lack of bias. After all 21 teachers had returned questions with comments, the list of interview questions was honed to 12. This list of 12 questions was reviewed by Dr. Jill Jones in conjunction with a class presentation of the prospectus.

Teacher interviews were included to answer Research Question 3: *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED students to be resilient?* All certified teachers at the school who currently teach or have taught students from the family involved in the case study were included in the blind draw with no identifiers. The generated list of teachers received an email explaining the interview process and asking for volunteers. Once all teachers had responded, a list of willing teachers was made and separated by gender to

ensure an even distribution. A blind draw was held with each set of teacher names, and four names were drawn from each gender pool.

Teachers chosen were interviewed individually, audio taped, and transcribed. The files were labeled Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, Teacher E, Teacher F, Teacher G, and Teacher H. The same 12 questions previously approved were asked of each teacher in the same order to obtain answers that could be compared for similarities and differences. No names were used in audiotapes or on surveys. These audio files were stored on the previously mentioned flash drive. Open coding took place after completion of the compilation of answers by question number.

The main category found in the literature review concerning teacher perceptions and roles related to academic success of ED students was focus on the importance of the relationship between the student and the teacher. Because the interview script was made of 12 questions related to successful and unsuccessful ED students, the researcher noted themes that ran through the answers to the questions. Themes noted were Theme 1: Personal Student Qualities, Theme 2: Support at Home, Theme 3: Support Outside the Home, and Theme 4: Family Structure. Once information about these themes was gathered, analysis began. All student subjects, teachers, and family members, were given the researcher's email address so that they might send follow up questions and/or additions to answers.

All data were collected and delineated in this research proposal by the researcher. Data from family, student, and teacher interviews were transcribed within 24 hours of each interview and reviewed twice over the following three days to ensure familiarity with the information. Familiarization and organization was the first stage, as suggested by Ary et al. (2006). The data were organized by each research question to compare

within question data. Once all was organized, the researcher began the process of coding and recoding. Open coding began with the search for initial concepts, with attention paid to qualities noted in the review of literature. Colored highlighters were used to denote possible categories. This led to themes found in the data. The constant comparative method was used, data were analyzed for themes, and interpretation began.

All audio taped interviews were saved to a flash drive that was dedicated to this study and password protected; the researcher is the only person with access to the original audios. During the study, the flash drive was kept in a locked file cabinet; after the study, the flash drive was stored in a safe deposit box. Participants were assured anonymity, and the researcher did not discuss the chosen family with anyone. To protect identities, all interview transcripts were saved under Students A-H, Parents A and B, and Teachers A-H.

The dedicated flash drive will be kept for five years by the researcher. All information was stored on the flash drive and kept by the researcher in a bank safe deposit box. Only the researcher has the key for access. In case the researcher dies before the five-year term, a note was placed with the flash drive with instructions to destroy the flash drive. After 5 years, the researcher will destroy the flash drive. The last three steps of Kvale's (1996) seven stages of an interview investigation were completed with Analyzing, Verifying, and Reporting. The information in the final study may be used in subsequent papers for publication and/or presentations, but only with the knowledge and consent of the subjects.

### **Researcher's Role**

The topic of resilient qualities of ED Caucasian students applied to the researcher personally because the researcher was the AYP Coordinator at the participating school

and worked with at-risk students, most of whom were from low SES homes and considered to be ED by receiving free or reduced lunch. As the AYP Coordinator, part of this researcher's job was to find ways to encourage and support ED students who were struggling academically and their families. The Caucasian group was specifically studied to suit the researcher's own student population needs. At the researcher's school, the Caucasian ED group has traditionally had a higher dropout rate than the African-American or Hispanic group. Discovering variables that support ED students is within this researcher's range of influence due to the ongoing research to find solutions to help the students, the daily interactions with these students and their families, and the daily work with teachers who try to support these students.

According to Ary et al. (2006), the role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry includes being personally involved, having empathy and understanding, and recognizing that the process is value bound. The researcher, taking into consideration the three components defined by Ary et al. (2006), did the initial document study of data related to ED students; reviewed and gathered literature to better understand the breadth of the problem and possible solutions; designed and deployed both surveys; interviewed, transcribed, coded, recoded, and delineated themes in all interviews from the three groups; performed all data analysis; and, compared results to published literature.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS / FINDINGS

### Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the reasons students from one Caucasian economically disadvantaged (ED) family were academically successful and resilient and to examine perceptions of this success through the eyes of parents, students, and teachers. One goal was to impact the school system that served the ED families by educating teachers about why some ED students are more academically successful than others and offer avenues for teachers to promote to parents. Results from this study will, hopefully, contribute to theory and help public schools in Tennessee understand family factors that support low SES students in being academically successful and resilient.

### Parent Interviews

The parent interviews were conducted separately and transcribed. The mother was interviewed at a restaurant, and the father was interviewed over the phone due to scheduling conflicts. The transcriptions were labeled as Parent A (mother) and Parent B (father). Once both interviews were transcribed, the researcher began familiarization with the final goal of trying to answer Research Question 1: *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?* Themes noted were Theme 1: Family Routines, Theme 2: Support, Theme 3: Values and Commitments, and Theme 4: Faith. During the interviews, the researcher learned that both parents had four-year college degrees, had been married for almost 28 years, and chose for the mother to stay at home and not work outside the home.

**Theme 1: Family Routines.** The theme of Family Routines, or lack thereof, was of particular interest because literature suggested that routines were an important aspect



of a child's academic success. Both parents spoke about having no real routines, in part due to so many children doing so many different things. The following addressed routines:

- “There’s always so much going on that we don’t have a routine. Somebody’s always gotta go somewhere.”
- “To us, of course, that is not late at all. . . . That’s probably a bad thing, but not usually have we had much of a routine, and why start now? It’s not hurt them too bad, I guess.” (Speaking about the lateness of the hour)
- “It has really not been real structured, including bedtime. With as many different directions that we were going, it’s just kind of hard to structure it too much, I guess. . . . We are kind of like a pinball. We bounce around wherever we need to be and take it as it goes.”
- “Now, sometimes things will get down to the last minute or something, and we’re up a little late.”
- “Today’s just crazy, as usual.”

**Theme 2: Support.** Both parents spoke of support by two groups of people: teachers and family members.

- “The bigger kids always helped the little ones if they needed help.”
- “Papaw, he has just been such a blessing to our family. . . . has always been a part of everything the kids do. He takes them places, watches them practice, goes to every game. He always read to our kids, taught them how to read, showed them leaves and things outside, took them places. He has always been right there.”
- “Papaw has taught all of them to read, I think. He is just so interested in every

part of their lives, and he shows it.”

- “Papaw and teachers and coaches have always had high expectations for them and their grades.”
- “We’ve had a lot of good teachers along the way, a lot of good support.”
- “We’ve had some relatives that may have mentioned to them that if they get an A or something they might buy them an ice cream or take them out to eat or something.”
- “We’ve had some good support. . . . My dad. . . . he’s helped lots of one on one with them and their academics. I told him he should have been a teacher probably. He’s helped an awful lot.”
- “And, you know, the teachers here have been good, have generally been very supportive.”

**Theme 3: Values and Commitments.** An interesting theme that became apparent after coding and recoding was Theme 3: Values and Commitments and what role those things take in everyday family life. In general with regards to having values and honoring commitments, parents talked about being married for almost 28 years, both finishing college, the father working for a company for several years, the grandfather being so dedicated to the children and working at the same job for over 30 years, and being committed to the children.

- “I like my kids at home, so that meant we’ve always had lots and lots of kids at the house.”
- “To be honest, we have never put academics as the first priority. We have put God as the first priority.”
- “Kids nowadays act like they are so entitled, and I just don’t get it. Why does

anyone think they deserve anything? We don't."

- "We have never put emphasis on material things. We live in the same house we have for a long time. The kids wear hand me downs. I saw one of the girls the other day with shoes on that looked horrible. I don't even remember how many kids they have been on, and she doesn't think a thing about it. Never asks for anything. Just take it and be thankful for everything you have. Don't fight over what color cup you drink out of. Just be thankful you have a cup. That's how we have always been."

- "Of course, we want them to do well, but if they are humble and love Jesus and live like it, and try their best at everything they do, the grades are secondary."

- "You know, you just do the best you can and live like you want them to live, and the rest takes care of itself. I'm never on time anywhere, and I don't worry about how I look much, but if the kids need to talk, that's important to me."

- "Don't worry about sleeping or whatever. Just go and listen."

- "If it's too late, we might say you'll just have to get a lower grade. You know, sometimes if you put things off they come back and bite you. That's part of the consequences that come with actions, and that's not a happy time sometimes. It's hard to stand by and let them get hurt, but that's how you learn."

- "We just try to do the best you can with what you've got and enjoy whatever you're doing."

- "We just try to have an even keel."

- "We both decided that whatever we could teach the kids, the main thing was that we wanted them to feel like they were loved and belonged in the house and they were glad to be here, not that it was a happy place all the time . . . ."

- “And, if you’ve got the home system in place that encourages kids to enjoy being kids and not try to push them into something too early and let them enjoy growing up, they find their God-given interests and their natural passions.”

**Theme 4: Faith.** The overarching theme that the parents alluded to often was Theme 4: Faith. Both spoke openly about the importance to teaching children about being a Christian and about living everyday life in a manner that showed them how to live. They spoke of going to church and taking the children to church, about their own experiences in church and youth groups and how those experiences affected them. The mother told the story of meeting the father at church and his beautiful voice: “He wasn’t the kind of guy I usually dated, wasn’t the best looking, but he had a heart for Jesus, and I just loved that about him.” Other comments regarding faith included the following:

- “We have put God as the first priority. That’s what we have always stressed.”
- “We have raised them to love Jesus and tried to teach them to not take anything for granted.”
- “Jesus is the one who died for us, and God provides everything for us.”
- “. . . if they are humble and love Jesus and live like it and try their best at everything they do, the grades are secondary.”
- “If you put Jesus first, the rest just falls into place.”
- “I know that the topic of faith can be touchy at times, but at home we put God first and try to teach what we were taught and what seems to work and what the truth is and let other things follow along in line there.”
- “As far as family goes, it’s just been a bunch of answered prayers and people helping and a lot of support.”

- “When you are a part of a group that you’re at church and at school with, it pretty much keeps you in line.”
- “I knew when I met her that her faith was very important and essential to her, so we immediately found the bond there – who God was and what Jesus had done for us and that was definitely a good starting point and when the kids came along we had a good common objective about how to approach their schooling and everything that goes with it.”
- “Whatever happens, you’re [the children] are ours, God gave you to us, and sure family life is troubled sometimes but some things are worth the trouble and some aren’t, and you guys have always been worth the trouble.”
- “And, if you’ve got the home system in place that encourages kids to enjoy being kids and not try to push them into something too early and let them enjoy growing up, they find their God-given interests and their natural passions.”

### **Student Interviews**

The children not living in the home, ages 20 and over and labeled Student A - D, were interviewed by phone and audio taped with permission; notes were taken. The children between 11 and 18 still present in the home, labeled Student E – H, were interviewed and audio taped; no videotaping occurred. The mother was present during interviews of the children ages 11 and 13. The notes taken by the researcher included general information about age, education, and reasons for success, but the researcher allowed the subjects to guide the conversation. In an effort to gain information about areas covered in the teacher interviews and surveys, general topics covered included support from parents, teachers, and other adults, ideas about students who are not academically successful and advice to those students, and places of support. The

audiotapes were reviewed and transcribed.

Once all interviews had been conducted, transcribed, coded, and recoded, themes based upon topics covered in teacher and parent data were delineated. Namely, four areas of interest emerged from the interviews, with all participants commenting on the areas: support from parents, teachers, and other adults, ideas about and advice for students who are not academically successful, and places of support besides home. The following themes and responses from students were noted:

**Theme 1: Support from parents.**

- “My parents made sure I had all the necessary appliances needed to get my work completed successfully, and they helped me when I could not figure my work out on my own.”
- “They had an active interest in my studies and often showed it by asking how school was going. If I ever had any problems, I could go to either of them for help. I was always aware of their desire for me to perform well in school, but they never pushed me too hard. (I pushed myself hard enough back then as it was.) All that they asked of me was that I do my best, and if that wasn't enough to get the grade, that was okay with them.”
- “They helped me by reminding me to finish homework, assisting me in studying for tests and quizzes, giving advice on my papers, projects, and presentations.”
- “My parents have always been extremely encouraging, but not to the extent of leading me to don false hope or expectations in myself. They taught me, more by continuous example than direct instruction, the universal concept of cause and effect. Given the nature of such all-encompassing premises, it wasn't terribly

difficult to apply this basic knowledge to my approach of attaining academic well-being.”

- “They drove me to school and helped me with my homework.”
- “They helped with homework and showed me how to do things when I didn't understand how.”
- “By helping me with homework when I didn't understand how to do it.”
- “They made me do homework and study; advised me when I needed it, whether it was about schoolwork or something in my personal life; let me learn from my mistakes and encouraged me to do better from those experiences; always were there for me no matter what.”

### **Theme 2: Support from teachers.**

- “My teachers were great at answering all the questions I had, and they did a wonderful job of not just telling me what to do but showing me how to do it. They also provided a relaxed atmosphere that was fit for me to successfully complete my work.”
- “They pushed me constantly to improve in every aspect of my learning. I often felt overwhelmed at all of the tasks I was expected to complete between various classes, but I am thankful for the experience. My teachers challenged me constantly, and as a result, I learned to challenge myself. I also learned a great deal about how to manage my time in order to finish all of my assignments by their respective deadlines, and this skill has continued to help me tremendously in college as well.”
- “I feel my teachers helped me by having high standards when it came to work ethic; therefore, I was in a way pushed to work hard and try my best.”

- “As is the case with most students, certain teachers had a greater impact on my life than did others. For this reason, I can't help but delineate between the alternate meanings of the word *help*. Some teachers helped me to achieve academic success within their respective classes alone by administering the required material by interesting or enjoyable methods. However, a select few other teachers made a more lasting impression on my academic success. It seems to me that the role of a teacher is not only to instruct students in their chosen subjects or fields, requiring the memorization of facts and formulas, but also to supplement the students' collective ability to learn in its most fundamental meaning: to think in different ways, absorb information, and assess given situations according to what they have learned. This was painfully accomplished in me through relentlessly challenging me and my classmates with both the number and design of our assignments. Once we understood how to approach a given obscure task, to actual completion of it was easy. It was the development of a deeper, broader, and multiplicitous understanding that was challenging, and consequently what has led to my continued academic success.”
- “My teachers answered some questions, but not many, as I went to a private Christian school which used self-paced curriculum, so there were no lectures, and there was minimal student-teacher contact.”
- “My teachers teach me lots of stuff.”
- “Teachers teach me things and make me feel comfortable asking questions when I need to.”
- “They were happy to help if you ever needed it and made you feel comfortable when you did ask for help; would make sure students had an



understanding of the material and would do about anything necessary to give a better understanding of something if we had a problem.”

**Theme 3: Support from other adults.**

- “Apart from my parents and teachers, my papaw and my older brothers played a huge role in my academic success. My papaw taught me how to read and write as a little girl and was always filling me full of information about the trees, insects, and showing me how to do countless things. He has always been there for me, regardless of what I need, and I am thankful for him. My brothers were always open to any questions I had, and they did not mind helping me figure out how to do any of my work.”

- “My uncle Bud helped me the most during school. He graduated valedictorian from Harvard Law, and he is one smart cookie. Being a lawyer, he was never that bad off financially. Every year before school started, he would help my parents buy our school supplies because he knew they couldn't afford it all. I can't even begin to imagine how much he spent on us over all those years. He also questioned us constantly about how we were doing in school, and he told us he would only be happy if we made all A's and B's. He always said this in a way that let us know he really wanted us to do well, but that he would still love us just the same even if we made a bad grade. In high school, I could always call him if I was having a problem critiquing an article or formatting a bibliography page, and he always took time out of his busy schedule to help me.”

- “I feel my coaches played a key role in my academic success. In order for me to be allowed to participate in sports I had to meet the academic standards my coaches set. Also, I feel my papaw encouraged me to make good grades because

he was always interested to see what all of us made whenever we received progress reports or report cards. I always wanted him to be impressed whenever he saw my grades.”

- “My grandfather played a momentous role in kick-starting my academic career. He taught me to read and write and also helped me to understand the fundamentals of arithmetic. Furthermore, he also has been very encouraging and challenging in all facets of my life. He never allowed me to say that I was incapable of anything, but rather offered the idea that sheer effort is a success in itself.”
- “My papaw was really helpful, but not with academics directly. He always had an optimistic attitude and pushed me to do the same. While that's not as academic as helping with homework, I think that I approached school-related activities with a more positive attitude than I would have otherwise, and this had an indirect but positive effect on my school performance.”
- “My papaw and sisters helped me, and they also helped me with my homework.”
- “My papaw has always liked to help all of us with our homework and school work. He also comes to all our games and practices.”
- “My papaw, he first taught me to read before I started school and was always there for encouragement throughout grade school and even still today in college.”

**Theme 4: Ideas about unsuccessful students.**

- “I believe the students who are not academically successful in school are that way because they choose to be. They are lazy, and they are not willing to put in the time it takes to do their work and do it right. Throughout my four years of

high school, most of the students who were not academically successful were that way because they had no work ethic, and they did not care about getting good grades until it was too late to do anything about it.”

- “It seems to me that there are several possible reasons for students performing poorly in school. 1. Some kids have a home life that is not conducive to learning. A kid who has a broken family, unconcerned parents, etc. may be too distracted by his/her situation to focus on school. 2. Some kids are lazy. School is very hard work, and most students don't really enjoy it. But while a lot of students are willing to put in the time and effort to do well, there are some who just don't do their best because it isn't an enjoyable way to spend their time. 3. Some kids are just not as smart as other. Let's face it, not everyone is going to be an honor roll student. We're all wired differently, and some kids are going to perform worse in school than others because of that.”

- “I feel some students just don't try to be successful and that they are lazy and have no ambition to do well. I think others don't have anyone who believes in them, or they don't believe in themselves.”

- “Excluding students who are legitimately incapable of being successful in school due to physical or mental restraints, it seems that the only difference, as it pertains to academic success, between a student at the top of any given class from a student at the bottom of the same class would be the variation in each student's respective set of values and goals. A goal can be thought of as the future projection of a present value set. Thus, people have goals, and, ideally, their daily routines are reflective of these aspirations. Unfortunately, being successful in school doesn't always line up with a person's values or goals, so becoming so

could be seen as wasted effort in that person's sight.”

- “Some people are not successful because they don't think they can be. Kids are inundated with the idea that they are either smart or not, in the same way that they are blonde or brunette. Intelligence does not work that way, though. There are intellectual prodigies, but most smart people are smart, not because of genetics, but hard work. If more kids got that, I think they would work harder in school and be happier about doing it.”

- “Some kids don't try their hardest.”

- “Some kids aren't good in school because they don't try. Some kids don't understand and don't have anyone to help them.”

- “I would say not having a healthy relationship at home with your parents and family impacts you as a student because when you have a rough day at school and come home to what makes your day even worse school will be the last thing on your mind. Also having friends that do not encourage you to do good and push you to do what needs to be done.”

**Theme 5: Ideas of support and faith.**

- “My relationship with God definitely made me want to be the best I could be academically because as Christians, we are supposed to do all things to the glory of God. Also, having four older brothers, all of which are smart and one even being the valedictorian of his class, pushed me and made me strive to be the best I could be in school. I would also have to attribute some of my success to my competitive nature, which always makes me strive to do my best.”

- “Definitely my beliefs helped me. I am a Christian, and I looked at school differently than other students because of that. For one thing, I always tried my

best in school because I was a Christian. I was always told to do my best by my parents, and a good Christian kid should obey his parents. Furthermore, I have read in the Bible that I am to do everything as if I were doing it unto the Lord. And I was not about to give Him my second best attempt. I also think that basic Christian principles, such as not lying, played a huge role in my academic success. While there were many times that I could have cheated on homework or a test, I never did because that was tantamount to lying in my book. Even when other students all around me were cheating, I refused to because I knew it was wrong. I think this helped me academically because knowing that cheating was not an option forced me to learn and figure out all the answers on my own rather than rely on whoever happened to be sitting next to me. Finally, being a Christian brought me comfort when school was particularly hard. I read in the Bible that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord, and school definitely falls under all things. When I struggled with a particularly difficult assignment, I would often remind myself that it would not be the end of the world if I messed up. Rather, I knew that everything would work together for my good in the end.”

- “I feel that since God has blessed me with a healthy life and a great family to support me, I shouldn't take it for granted, so I want to do the best I can. Also, all of my siblings are incredibly smart, and considering I'm a rather competitive person, I especially don't want to get beat out by my brothers or sisters at anything, including academics.”

- “There are a few other things to which I can attribute my academic success. The first that comes to mind is my position in the family line. My brother immediately above me has always been my greatest companion. So, naturally,

what he did, I wanted to do too. In hindsight, the fact that he's an undeniable genius with peerless work ethic could have set me up for a lifetime of shortcomings and disappointments, but it didn't. He did, and continues to do well, blazing a trail before me. If he's already done it and succeeded, why can't I? From this instance it could probably be inferred that I want to set a good example for my younger siblings, so that they might also benefit from my efforts. Lastly but certainly not least in my influences is my faith. Although it caught on a bit late in high school, I realized that not only am I a witness for Christ in my daily life as a general term, but also in the finer aspects of my actions. "Whatever you do, do it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."

- "I think church helped. At that time, I was attending First Baptist Church, and I think the sense of community that brought me was an important factor in my academic success. Humans are communal beings, and belonging to a community is an important part of intellectual and emotional development, in the same sense as a well-rounded diet."
- "I want to do my best to please God and my parents and my papaw."
- "My brothers and sisters have cared a lot about doing good in school and have set a good example for me. Also, I know it pleases God when I do my best."
- "Having three older brothers was very helpful through school because if I didn't understand something chances were more than likely that one of them knew how to explain it to me and help me to get a better understanding."

**Theme 6: Advice for struggling students.**

- "No matter how hard it seems at the present time, they will get through their struggle with hard work and perseverance. Just don't give up, set goals for

yourself and complete them, get all the tutoring you can get, and keep on keeping on!”

- “Always do his best because that is the most anyone can ask of him. I would also tell him to use the resources available to him. If his parents or siblings are willing and able to help him with his problematic assignments, he should go to them for help, but not ask them to do all the work for him. He should do his own work so that he can learn how to do it firsthand rather than simply how to copy. I would tell him to set a reasonable goal and shoot for it. If he has a D in math and wants to improve, I would suggest tutoring and doing extra practice problems so he could hopefully improve to a B by the end of the year, rather than try to kill himself by going for the all but impossible A.”

- “Just try. You can't achieve anything if you don't try to. After all it is their life they're affecting, so I would assume they want a rather good one and they need to know they have to work for it.”

- “I have a hard time finding the motivation to do anything if I can't see how it's helping me in the long run. So, I would advise that he or she finds something that gives him or her meaning; find something worth striving for. After that, it's just a matter of connecting the dots to get to where he or she wants to be in the future. The key or cornerstone or foundation for realizing that goal is academic success, both for the notoriety (for advancement purposes) and the broadening of the mind.”

- “Being smart is not genetic, but the result of hard work. A lot of kids fail early on in school, decide they're dumb, and accept that as part of their identity. After that, their failure is a given. This is a tragic result of a society that doesn't

understand intelligence.”

- “Just try your best.”
- “Try your best and ask for help when you need it.”
- “Be glad that they have the opportunity to receive an education because many people around the world will never get a chance to learn. Also to get a tutor, even though it might not be the coolest thing to do, because they are very helpful and willing to teach you, and the feeling of satisfaction when you start understanding more and grades start rising is definitely worth it.”

At the end of each interview, students were asked if they would like to add anything else. The only student who responded commented, “Only that high school is the training ground for your future so take advantage of it. Don't get so caught up in the popularity contests, the drama, and all the other things that really do not matter in the long run. Appreciate your teachers and all the other people in your life who are there to help you and take advantage of all that is around to make you successful.”

### **Student Survey**

The method of survey distribution used was Zoomerang© via email request. After discussing the survey and obtaining the email addresses of the children with the mother of the family in this case study, the email was sent to all children of the family. Those children over 18 who had already moved out of the house, Students A-D, were sent an email with information about the study and a copy of the consent form attached. Student E-H, one of which was over the age of 18, still lived in the family home. An email was sent to the mother of the family with a copy of the consent form attached; the mother monitored Students E-H while they were taking the online survey. Parameters were set so that one computer station could be given access to surveys for each student.



All responses were anonymous.

**Student survey question 1.** *Please rank the statements from most important to your academic success (5) to least important to your academic success (1). If you have already completed high school, please reflect on the time you spent in your parents' home and what helped most and least with your academic success.* Student Survey Question 1 asked students to rank statements about academic success in relation to things they had present in their lives. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of students who responded; the second row represents the actual number of students who responded.

Table 2

*Student Survey: Question 1*

Importance to Academic Success	Most Important	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important	3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Important	4 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	Least Important
Likert Scale Rating	5	4	3	2	1
I have people around me I trust and who love me, no matter what.	38% (n=3)	25% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	25% (n=2)	12% (n=1)
I have people who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble.	0% (n=0)	12% (n=1)	12% (n=1)	25% (n=2)	50% (n=4)
I have people who show me how to do things right by the way they do things.	38% (n=3)	12% (n=1)	25% (n=2)	25% (n=2)	0% (n=0)
I have people who want me to learn to do things on my own.	0% (n=0)	50% (n=4)	12% (n=1)	25% (n=2)	12% (n=1)
I have people who help me when I am sick, in danger, or	25%	0%	50%	0%	25%

need to learn. (n=2) (0=2) (n=4) (n=0) (n=2)

**Student survey question 2.** *Please rank the statements from most important to your academic success (5) to least important to your academic success (1). If you have already completed high school, please reflect on the time you spent in your parents' home and what helped most and least with your academic success.* Student Survey Question 2 asked students to rank statements about academic success in relation to personal qualities they felt they had. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of respondents; the second row represents the actual number of students who responded.

Table 3

*Student Survey: Question 2*

Importance to Academic Success	Most Important	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important	3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Important	4 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	Least Important
Likert Scale Rating	5	4	3	2	1
I am a person people can like and love.	0% (n=0)	12% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	50% (n=4)	38% (n=3)
I am glad to do nice for others and show my concern.	0% (n=0)	12% (n=1)	50% (n=4)	38% (n=3)	0% (n=0)
I am respectful of others and myself.	0% (n=0)	62% (n=5)	25% (n=2)	12% (n=1)	0% (n=0)
I am willing to be responsible for what I do.	88% (n=7)	0% (n=4)	12% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
I am sure things will be alright.	12% (n=1)	12% (0=1)	12% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	62% (n=5)

**Student survey question 3.** *Please rank the statements from most important to your academic success (5) to least important to your academic success (1). If you have already completed high school, please reflect on the time you spent in your parents' home and what helped most and least with your academic success.* Student Survey Question 3 asked students to rank statements about academic success in relation to actions they could take. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of respondents; the second row represents the actual number of students who responded.

Table 4

*Student Survey: Question 3*

Importance to Academic Success	Most Important	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important	3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Important	4 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	Least Important
Likert Scale Rating	5	4	3	2	1
I can talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me.	0% (n=0)	12% (n=1)	38% (n=3)	12% (n=1)	38% (n=3)
I can find ways to solve problems that I face.	4% (n=50)	0% (n=0)	38% (n=3)	12% (n=1)	12% (n=1)
I can control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous.	0% (n=4)	0% (n=0)	38% (n=3)	12% (n=1)	0% (n=0)
I can figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or take action.	0% (n=0)	25% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	12% (n=1)	62% (n=5)
I can find someone to help me when I need it.	50% (n=4)	50% (0=4)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)

## **Synthesis of Student Data**

Student data were collected by qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey and aimed at answering Research Question 2: *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?* The student survey consisted of three questions dealing with things they had present in their lives, personal qualities they felt they had, and actions they could take to encourage and support their academic success. After coding of the interviews occurred, five themes emerged: support from parents, support from teachers, support from other adults, ideas about unsuccessful students, and ideas of support and faith, respectively.

A synthesis of all of the data suggested that the participants felt most strongly about things and people they had in their lives, namely, supportive parents (Theme 1), teachers, (Theme 2) other adults (Theme 3), and faith in God (Theme 5). Participants ranked on the survey having people who taught by example as the most important support and having people around them whom they trusted and loved them unconditionally as the second most important support. Interviews corroborated these findings as students commented on having their parents always helping them and being supportive, being “extremely encouraging,” teaching them “more by continuous example than direct instruction,” and showing them how to do things. Interviews also indicated a sense of unconditional love and trust between the students and parents. One student noted that the parents “let me learn from my mistakes and encouraged me to do better from those experiences; always were there for me no matter what.”

Not only did participants have parents who supported them, but they also felt supported by their teachers. Students spoke to the survey’s most important support of having people who taught by example in the form of teachers: “They did a wonderful job

of not just telling me what to do but showing me how to do it.” The second highest ranked survey area of support was having people around them whom they trusted and loved them unconditionally; however, interviews did not corroborate this ranking, possibly due to the nature of the student-teacher relationship.

The presence and support of other adults in interviews (Theme 3) verified the first and second ranked areas of support of having people teach by example and having those whom they trusted and loved them unconditionally. One participant named a beloved uncle who had helped support them financially with school supplies and emotionally by wanting them to do well but loving them even if they made a poor grade. One participant noted that “coaches played a key role” in his success because he had to meet their academic standards. Two of the participants gave homage to their own brothers and sisters for helping them.

Seven of the eight participants stressed how much their grandfather, Papaw, had supported them over the years. Two of the participants attributed learning to read to their grandfather. Most notably were the comments about their grandfather’s emotional support: He “was always there for encouragement,” “had an optimistic attitude and pushed me to do the same,” “has been very encouraging and challenging in all facets of my life. He never allowed me to say that I was incapable of anything, but rather offered the idea that sheer effort is a success in itself,” and “has always been there for me, regardless of what I need, and I am thankful for him.”

Although not directly asked in the survey questions, a definite theme of faith in God (Theme 5) emerged as an academic support. Seven of the eight participants spoke freely about how being a Christian and wanting to please God made them give their best efforts in school. Of particular note were the ideas of doing “all things to the glory of

God,” being “a witness for Christ in my daily life,” the “sense of community” brought about by attending church, being blessed “with a healthy life and a great family,” and the fact that “being a Christian brought me comfort when school was particularly hard.”

Student Survey Question 2 asked participants to consider personal qualities that help them to be academically successful. According to the survey, students felt that the most important personal quality they had for success was being willing to be responsible for their actions; the second highest ranked quality was being respectful of themselves and others. When data from the survey and interviews were combined, a theme of personal qualities did not emerge.

However, comments in other themes indirectly addressed the ideas of being responsible and respectful. For example, in Theme 4, Ideas about Unsuccessful Students, comments emerged: unsuccessful students were deemed “lazy,” had “no work ethic” and “did not care,” and had “no ambition to do well.” Both responsibility and respectfulness were indirectly discussed when one student noted a difference in a successful student and an unsuccessful student being “the variation in each student's respective set of values and goals.”

Personal traits of being responsible and respectful also resonated in Theme 6, Advice for Struggling Students, and Theme 5, Ideas of Support and Faith. In Theme 6, participants spoke of “hard work and perseverance,” setting goals, and realizing that “it is their life they're affecting, so I would assume they want a rather good one and they need to know they have to work for it.” In Theme 5, participants remarked about being respectful in respect to being a Christian and the values that are attached to religion. For example, one student noted, “A good Christian kid should obey his parents,” while one expressed a sense of responsibility to his siblings: “I want to set a good example for my

younger siblings, so that they might also benefit from my efforts.” Although many remarks in interviews were indirectly associated with personal traits, very few participants made boastful statements of personal qualities that were not in some way attributed to someone or something else.

Student Survey Question 3 asked participants to rank statements about academic success in relation to actions they could actually take. The most important action noted by participants was being able to find someone to help them when they needed it; the second-ranked item was being able to find ways to solve problems. When survey data were combined with interview data, actions were tied through all six themes, but especially Themes 1-3 and 5 dealing with feeling support from different areas. In Theme 1, Support from Parents, students evidenced possible actions associated with their feeling of parental support: “I could go to either of them for help.” In Theme 2, Support from Teachers, participants expressed a general feel of being supported by teachers and comfortable enough to ask for help when they needed it. In Theme 3, Support from Other Adults, participants stated that they had many people, including family members and coaches, to whom they could rely on to help solve problems. In Theme 5, Ideas of Support and Faith, the ideas of being able to find help and solve problems took a more introspective slant, relying on faith in God: “knowing that cheating was not an option forced me to learn and figure out all the answers on my own,” “being a Christian brought me comfort when school was particularly hard. I read in the Bible that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord;” and, that belonging to a church gave “the sense of community.”

Transcripts of interviews pertaining to Themes 4 and 6, Ideas about Unsuccessful Students and Advice to Unsuccessful Students, respectively, also held indirect personal

actions and problem solving ideas through giving advice to others. For example, participants felt that being lazy or not having goals were reasons that students were not successful; hence, an action would be to be productive and set goals. Advice in Theme 6 was directed at how others can also be academically successful, not necessarily in the form of personal ways that participants were successful themselves.

### **Teacher Interviews**

A list of certified teachers still employed by the school was compiled and narrowed by looking for teachers who had previously taught one or more of the students of the family studied. From this shortened list, an email was sent to ask for willing volunteers. Names were divided by gender in an effort to have an equal percentage of males and females. In a blind draw, four names were taken from each gender category for a total of eight certified teachers. The teachers were asked the same 12 questions so that answers could be compared. Appendix E contains the interview guide used.

**Teacher interview question 1.** *Please state how long have you been in education and your current position.* Teacher Interview Question 1 asked teachers about position and years of experience. The least experienced teacher noted 5 years, and the most experienced teacher noted 16 years. The average of all 8 teachers was 10.5 years of experience. All teachers held certified classroom teaching positions. One teacher (12.5% of respondents) was also a Department Chair, and all four of the male teachers were also serving as coaches.

**Teacher interview question 2.** *How (in what capacities) do you work with economically disadvantaged (ED) students and parents?* Teacher Interview Question 2 asked teachers to describe how they worked with ED students and parents. One hundred percent of teachers responded that they worked in the classroom with students, and



37.5% mentioned working with parents in their responses. The following were some comments regarding this question:

- “I work with them only as a part of my regular education setting. I have, however, also assisted former players by helping with applications to colleges/universities.”
- “I work with the students in class and during tutoring if they come and with the parents as I need to. I think you have to take a careful approach with them. You have to be careful not to make a child feel like he or she is in a different social class even though they are. I think you try to be more sensitive to their physical needs. If they look dirty or something, you might want to write a referral. Their work won’t always look perfect, so you might evaluate them as just the best that they can do, a different level. You wouldn’t ask them to re-do something or do the work again because the learning is not the issue.”
- “As needed in the classroom with students, with parents if needed.”

**Teacher interview question 3.** *Do you do home visits? If so, please describe a typical home visit.* Teacher Interview Question 3 asked teachers about their experiences, if any, with home visits to ED students’ homes. None of the teachers reported doing home visits; however, one teacher commented, “No, not typically. I used to work homebound and did visit an ED student’s home approximately 9-10 years ago.”

**Teacher interview question 4.** *What do you think is the number one thing that prevents economically disadvantaged (ED) students from graduating?* Teacher Interview Question 4 asked for the teachers’ opinions on what truly prevents ED students from graduating from high school. Twenty-five percent responded with the actual statement “lack of motivation,” while 75% responded with answers related to a lack of support at

home. The following were comments from the teachers:

- “Lack of motivation.”
- “Lack of guidance from others (parents uneducated or unknowledgeable) and lack of motivation.”
- “Support from family and home.”
- “Parental influence.”
- “Lack of support at home. Education is not valued as an integral part of the child's future well-being.”
- “Lack of parent support at home, not having an expectation level at home. Sometimes the easier thing to do is just let them stay in bed, not make them go to school. When they’re working against us instead of with us, that’s probably the number one thing. I think sometimes not having stability is, as far as where they live, several of the students are just in ten different schools continuously, and then they get behind and then they fall through the cracks.”
- “Poverty breeds poverty - the inability to break the cycle of ignorance due to economic conditions.”
- “No support; not held to high expectations; no one to believe in them.”

**Teacher interview question 5.** *What do you think is the number one predictor of high school dropouts?* Teacher Interview Question 5 asked for teachers’ perceptions of the main predictor of students who drop out of high school and do not graduate. Twenty-five percent responded that being ED was the number one predictor of dropouts, and 25% noted lack of skill. The following were comments from the teachers:

- “Lack of finances in the home.”

- “Discipline issues.”
- “Ability plus family influence.”
- “Whether or not their parents graduated high school.”
- “Lack of support at home.”
- “I think it’s a combination of the home life and skill level, and a lot of times the skill level is due to the fact that the home life, I have students who don’t understand basic things like Little Red Riding Hood. They don’t get those experiences at home, don’t get read to, don’t get taught those things that we think would be common knowledge for most, and they’re not. They come to high school and they feel like they’re behind, they feel like they’re starting at the back of the line, so I think it’s twice as hard for them to feel like they can be successful when they’re at the back of the line.”
- “Parent's income - single parent households.”
- “Attendance issues.”

**Teacher interview question 6.** *What do you think enables some ED students to be resilient (thrive despite their socioeconomic status)?* Teacher Interview Question 6 asked teachers to give insight into what they think helps some ED students rise above and overcome their situations to be resilient and academically successful. Sixty-two point five percent of teachers mentioned students having some kind of support person or system in their lives, and 100% of those mentioning support referred specifically to support outside the home; 60% of teachers mention support referred specifically to parental support. The word *desire* was used by 37.5% of teachers, and 25% of teachers used the word *future*, referring students having vision to see themselves being successful and rising above their situations. The following were comments from teachers:

- “Support from another adult/program outside of the home, like a coach, youth pastor, or program director.”
- “They have assistance outside the home and are challenged by someone to break the cycle.”
- “Past experiences and role models”
- “Teacher and parental support, along with a desire and work ethic that is conducive to success.”
- “Their parents value education and push their students to succeed--or there is someone at school--a friend, a teacher, or administrator--who steps in and takes over this role. Another possibility is that the student has a clear vision of his/her future and knows what he/she needs to do to succeed.”
- “I think it’s different things. I think for some it’s that innate desire to succeed. I don’t want to live the life that my momma’s living. I want to get out of my situation. What I see in our system, there has been some positive influence somewhere along the line that has helped them be successful. It’s been a teacher or a coach. I had one yesterday that had a stepfather come into his life and his school life improved because his home was better. Sometimes it’s been Boys and Girls Club, a grandparent, but something other than Mom or Dad. Someone gets involved, and these students start to do better. It’s an outside influence.”
- “The ability to see their future without limitations.”
- “Their desire to rise above their situations.”

**Teacher interview question 7.** *If you had to describe the typical home situation of ED students who are NOT successful, what would it be?* Teacher Interview Question 7 asked teachers to describe what they envision the typical home life to be for students who

are ED but do not experience academic success. Twenty-five percent of teachers used the words *single parent* in reference to who the student lives with, while 25% suggested that students lived with someone other than a biological parent, such as a grandparent. The idea that a student must work at a job to help provide money for the family's needs was mentioned by 25% of teachers. Lack of parental support was given by 75% of teachers as a major hurdle for students to overcome. Comments on the typical home situation of unsuccessful ED students included the following:

- “Single parent home or student living with another family member - grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.”
- “Typically I would perceive there to be very little encouragement from home and that most of the students themselves are working to financially assist the family and therefore are forced to compromise academic success.”
- “Lack of family support and influence.”
- “Non-supportive parents with an environment that doesn't allow the student a place, or the time, to study from home.”
- “Parents are not home in the afternoon. Parents don't check/help with homework. The student may have to take on extra responsibilities such as a job or taking care of younger brothers or sisters. Family life may be dysfunctional.”
- “Single parent, depressed neighborhood, non-educated parent, poor diet, fear.”
- “May not even live with a biological parent; no support; survival mode.”
- “No one at home monitoring the student; student has no boundaries set by parents; no expectations; living in the present, no concern for the future.”

**Teacher interview question 8.** *If you had to describe the typical home situation of ED students who ARE successful, what would it be?* Teacher Interview Question 8

asked teachers the opposite of Teacher Interview Question 7, specifically, to describe what they perceived to be the home life of successful ED students. Sixty-two point five percent of teachers suggested that students lived with both parents in a reasonably stable home; 25% mentioned *single parent* but added that those single parents monitored the student carefully. Comments from teachers about this typical household included the following:

- “Single parent home but an active parent in the child's education - contacts the teacher, expects good grades, etc.”
- “Homes where parents are encouraging and other distant family members or outside influences are present as either encouragement or for financial assistance.”
- “Two-parent home that is somewhat stable.”
- “Parents that are involved with the students' school work; there is an environment that allows the students the time and place to do school work from home.”
- “Parents are home in the afternoon and/or check up on homework/grades. Parents help students with schoolwork and/or communicate about school often. Parents make it clear to students that school is important and motivate their children to succeed.”
- “Single parent, educated parent striving to better him/herself, protected with high expectations.”
- “Someone at home who wants them to succeed, keeps up with them and what they are doing; most have both parents or at least one.”
- “High expectations at home regardless of financial situation.”

**Teacher interview question 9.** *When ED students are NOT successful, what do you think is the key ingredient missing in the home?* Teacher Interview Question 9 asked teachers to choose the thing missing in the home of an unsuccessful ED student. The word *support* was used by 50% of teachers, and 12.5% felt that the level of education, or lack thereof, impeded students the most. Comments on the missing ingredient in the home included the following:

- “Educated parent.”
- “Care and concern for the child - student basically has a home but takes care of himself/herself.”
- “Encouragement.”
- “For someone to give them advice and keep pushing them.”
- “Support.”
- “Lack of support from parents. Parents do not value education in their children. Parents do not give students attention or reinforcement.”
- “Support.”
- “Lack of support at home”

**Teacher interview question 10.** *If you had to describe qualities of a typical UNSuccessful ED student, what would those qualities be?* Teacher Interview Question 10 asked teachers to describe personal qualities of unsuccessful ED students. All teachers noted a lack of motivation; 37.5% mentioned *low self-esteem*, and 25% commented on excessive absences. Twenty-five percent cited discipline problems, and 25% cited a lack of basic skills as the issue. Comments about the qualities of unsuccessful ED students included the following:

- “Non-motivated, now centered, afraid.”
- “Apathetic toward school, absent a lot, doesn't complete homework, low self-esteem.”
- “Little motivation, discipline problems, tired and sluggish during the school day.”
- “Low self esteem, confidence and no desire to be successful.”
- “Apathy, lack of maturity”
- “They do not try hard, may be lacking basic skills that are required for high schooler, and this compounds their frustration.”
- “Instead of doing work honestly, they conduct work dishonestly, and they fall behind in their skill level. They’re in trouble outside of the classroom, so they’re either in juvenile, coming back, going to Alt School. Sometimes their criminal record plays into their success or lack of it. Mixed attitudes, willing to work when they want to, but when something else is going on outside of school, they’re not going to do, they’re not going to perform no matter what you do.”
- “No encouragement from home. Um. They get behind early, and once they get behind, they throw up their hands; no motivation.”

**Teacher interview question 11.** *If you had to describe qualities of a typical successful ED student, what would those qualities be?* Teacher Interview Question 11 asked teachers to contrast the qualities just described in Teacher Interview Question 10 with qualities of a successful ED student. The word *positive* was used by 62.5% of teachers as being an important quality to success. Looking toward the future was noted by 37.5% of teachers. All teachers mentioned motivation or desire to succeed as a key factor in success. Comments describing successful ED student qualities included the



following:

- “Motivated, future oriented, feeling of stability.”
- “Goal-oriented, seeks post secondary education, positive outlook, gets along well with peers.”
- “Driven, resilient, positive attitude, hard worker.”
- “Positive, happy and hardworking.”
- “Maturity and a will to succeed.”
- “They try their hardest, seek out teachers for extra help, use their ED situation as motivation to want to do better for themselves.”
- “Well, usually it’s the positive attitude. Some of them, the attitude is so bad, just all over the place. They may be damaged, may have been in state custody, foster homes. Who knows what they’ve seen and had done to them. What would that do to anyone? If you’re constantly worried and upset about basic needs, how are you supposed to concentrate on anything else, especially school? Attitude is the hardest thing to get over, attitude and honesty and motivated and being involved in anything in school, even friends.”
- “They want to succeed; motivated; dedicated; able to look for the positive and toward the future; focus on how to improve their situation, not blaming others.”

**Teacher interview question 12.** *Is there anything I have not covered that you think we should add?* Teacher Interview Question 12 was an open-ended question asking for things the teachers wanted to add but did not say in the previous eleven questions. Two of eight teachers, or 25%, made any comment, and both comments referred to the roles of schools in the lives of ED students. Comments about anything extra to add included the following:

- “You know, I guess just why are the schools expected to fix all of this when these are the kids we are supposed to teach and be accountable for? That’s just unreasonable, ludicrous. Nashville has no clue. How are we supposed to undo so much damage and raise these kids when their families won’t?”
- “We certainly have enough support around here!”

Once all interviews were compiled according to question number, the researcher began looking for themes that were found in multiple questions. These themes were Theme 1: Personal Student Qualities, Theme 2: Support at Home, and Theme 3: Family Structure.

Regarding Theme 1: Personal Student Qualities, teachers felt that resilient, academically successful students were responsible for their own success or failure due to qualities within themselves. Teacher Interview Question 4 asked for the teachers’ opinions on what truly prevents ED students from graduating from high school, and twenty-five percent responded with the actual statement “lack of motivation.” Teacher Interview Question 6 asked teachers to give insight into what they think helps some ED students rise above and overcome their situations to be resilient and academically successful. The word *desire* was used by 37.5% of teachers, and 25% of teachers used the word *future*, referring to the student having vision to see themselves being successful and rising above their situations.

Teacher Interview Question 10 asked teachers to describe personal qualities of unsuccessful ED students. All teachers noted a lack of motivation; 37.5% mentioned *low self-esteem*. Teacher Interview Question 11 asked teachers to contrast the qualities described in Teacher Interview Question 10 with qualities of a successful ED student. The word *positive* was used by 62.5% of teachers as being an important quality to

success. Looking toward the future was noted by 37.5% of teachers. All teachers mentioned motivation or desire to succeed as a key factor in success. In summary, teachers felt that personal qualities of motivation, desire to succeed, looking forward to the future, self-esteem, and a positive attitude.

Regarding Theme 2, Support at Home, teachers felt that a solid support system at home helps students by resilient and academic successful. Teacher Interview Question 4 asked for the teachers' opinions on what truly prevents ED students from graduating from high school, and 75% responded with answers related to a lack of support at home. Teacher Interview Question 6 asked teachers to give insight into what they think helps some ED students rise above and overcome their situations to be resilient and academically successful. Sixty-two point five percent of teachers mentioned students having some kind of support person or system in their lives; 60% of teachers mention support referred specifically to parental support.

Teacher Interview Question 7 asked teachers to describe what they envisioned the typical home life to be for students who are ED but do not experience academic success. Lack of parental support was given by 75% of teachers as a major hurdle for students to overcome. Teacher Interview Question 9 asked teachers to choose the thing missing in the home of an unsuccessful ED student. The word *support* was used by 50% of teachers. In summary, teachers felt that support in the home is invaluable in helping students be resilient and academically successful.

Regarding Theme 3: Family Structure, teachers felts that the structure of the family contributed to the resilience and academic success of ED students. Teacher Interview Question 7 asked teachers to describe what they envisioned the typical home life to be for students who are ED but do not experience academic success. Twenty-five

percent of teachers used the words *single parent* in reference to who the student lives with, while 25% suggested that students lived with someone other than a biological parent, such as a grandparent.

Teacher Interview Question 8 asked teachers the opposite of Teacher Interview Question 7, specifically, to describe what they perceived to be the home life of successful ED students. Sixty-two point five percent of teachers suggested that students lived with both parents in a reasonably stable home; 25% mentioned *single parent* but added that those single parents monitored the student carefully. In summary, teachers felt that living with both biological parents was crucial to a student's success.

### **Teacher Survey**

The method of survey distribution used was Zoomerang© via email request. After discussing the survey with the administration and faculty of the school, the email was sent to all teachers currently employed by the high school who had taught any of the students from the family being studied. Sixty-five percent of the certified faculty responded to 3 questions. Specifically, 26 of the 40 certified teachers participated in the teacher survey, which was created to only allow each person to respond once; all responses were anonymous.

**Teacher survey question 1.** *What makes ED students resilient and academically successful? Rank the following FAMILY factors in order of importance from most important (7) to least important (1).* Teacher Survey Question 1 asked teachers to rank family factors that they believed affected the academic success of students and made them resilient. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of respondents; the second row represents the actual number of teachers who responded.

Table 5

*Teacher Survey: Question 1*

	Most Important to Resilience	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important	3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Important	4 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	5 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	6 <sup>th</sup> Most Important	Least Important to Resilience
Two parent family	23% (n=6)	23% (n=6)	15% (n=4)	15% (n=4)	8% (n=2)	12% (n=3)	1% (n=4)
Amount of education of parent(s)	4% (n=1)	15% (n=4)	31% (n=8)	38% (n=10)	4% (n=1)	8% (n=2)	0% (n=0)
Number of children in the family	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	8% (n=2)	8% (n=2)	42% (n=11)	12% (n=3)	31% (n=8)
Daily family routine	0% (n=0)	35% (n=9)	12% (n=3)	27% (n=7)	12% (n=12)	8% (n=2)	8% (n=2)
Community where family lives	0% (n=0)	12% (n=3)	24% (n=6)	20% (n=5)	12% (n=3)	16% (n=4)	16% (n=4)
Good parenting skills	73% (n=19)	12% (n=3)	15% (n=15)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Religious beliefs	8% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	4% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	15% (n=4)	31% (n=8)	42% (n=11)

Ranking synthesis showed the number one thing that teachers believed made the ED students resilient and academically successful was having parents with good parenting skills; 73% ranked it as the most important, 12% ranked it as the second most important, and 15% ranked it as third most important. One hundred percent of teachers ranked good parenting skills within the top three attributes.

The second most recognized thing leading to academic success was having a family with two parents; 23% ranked it as the most important, 23% ranked it as the second most important, and 15% ranked it as third and fourth most important. However, 4% felt it was the least important factor to success, and 24% ranked it in the bottom three factors. The third most important factor in academic success was the amount of education of the parents, and the majority of teachers, 69% ranked it as third and fourth most important; no teachers ranked it as least important.

The fourth most important think leading to academic success was the daily family routine, but no teachers felt it was the most important to success. The fifth factor ranked was the community where the family lived, but no teacher chose to rank it as the most important. The sixth factor was the number of children in the family, but 85% of teachers ranked it in the bottom 3 factors to success. Collectively, teachers surveyed felt that the least important aspect that encouraged academic success was religious beliefs. Although 8% of teachers felt that religious beliefs were the most important to resilience and academic success, 42% believed it to be the least important aspect.

**Teacher survey question 2.** *Which place impacts the resilience and academic success of economically disadvantaged students the most? Please rate the following places from Most Important to resilience (1) to Least Important to resilience.* Teacher Survey Question 2 asked teachers to rank places that most impacted the students' resilience. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of respondents; the second row represents the actual number of teachers who responded.

Table 6

*Teacher Survey: Question 2*

	Most Important to Resilience	2 <sup>nd</sup> Most Important	3 <sup>rd</sup> Most Important	Least Important to Resilience
School	0% (n=0)	81% (n=21)	19% (n=5)	0% (n=0)
Home	96% (n=25)	4% (n=4)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Church	0% (n=0)	8% (n=2)	50% (n=13)	42% (n=11)
Community	0% (n=0)	19% (n=5)	35% (n=9)	46% (n=12)

Ranking synthesis showed the number one place teachers believed impacted resilient ED students the most was the home. Ninety-six percent of teachers felt it was the number one place of impact, and 4% ranked it second; this accounts for all teachers. Teachers ranked school as the second most important place; 81% ranked it as number two, and 19% ranked it as number 3. Nineteen percent of teachers felt that the community was the second most important place to being resilient, while only 8% felt church was the second most important. Community, however, was ranked as the least important place by 46%, while church was ranked the least important by 42%.

**Teacher survey question 3.** *Which characteristics are the biggest indicators that economically disadvantaged students are NOT academically successful? Please rank the following student characteristics from the Biggest Indicator (1) to the Least Indicator (6) that students are NOT academically successful.* Teacher Survey Question 3 asked teachers to rank student characteristics that indicated ED students were not academically

successful. The follow table represents their answers. For each area, the top row represents the percentage of respondents; the second row represents the actual number of teachers who responded.

Table 7

*Teacher Survey: Question 3*

	Biggest Indicator of Academically UNSuccessful Students	2 <sup>nd</sup> Biggest Indicator	3 <sup>rd</sup> Biggest Indicator	4 <sup>th</sup> Biggest Indicator	5 <sup>th</sup> Biggest Indicator	Least Indicator of Academically UNSuccessful Students
Clothing	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	4% (n=1)	19% (n=5)	71% (n=5)
Grooming	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	12% (n=3)	85% (n=22)	4% (n=1)
Behavior	27% (n=7)	12% (n=3)	38% (n=10)	19% (n=5)	4% (n=1)	0% (n=0)
Communication skills	0% (n=0)	24% (n=6)	28% (n=7)	44% (n=11)	0% (n=0)	4% (n=1)
General attitude	42% (n=11)	31% (n=8)	23% (n=6)	4% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Attendance	31% (n=8)	31% (n=8)	19% (n=5)	19% (n=5)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)

Ranking synthesis showed that teachers felt the number one indicator of academically unsuccessful ED students was general attitude. Forty-two percent of teachers ranked general attitude as number one, and 31% ranked it as number two. Teachers ranked attendance as the number two indicator of unsuccessful ED students and behavior as the number three indicator. Teachers felt that communication skills, or lack of, was the fourth biggest indicator; no teachers ranked it as the biggest indicator, and



74% ranked it as number 2, 3, or 4. However, a total of only 25 teachers ranked communication skills; hence, the statistics do not include one teacher's responses. The only area that did not have 100% responses was communication skills. Teachers felt that grooming and clothing were the smallest indicators of ED students' success level. Grooming ranked number five, and clothing ranked last in indicators with 77% noting it as number six and 19% as number five.

### **Synthesis of Teacher Data**

Teacher data were collected by qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey and aimed at answering Research Question 3: *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED students to be resilient?* The teacher survey consisted of three questions dealing with family factors, places, and student characteristics that encouraged and supported resilience and academic success of ED students. After coding of the interviews occurred, three themes emerged, including personal student qualities, support at home, and family structure.

Themes found in interviews and surveys were compiled. Personal Student Qualities (Theme 1) revealed that teachers felt personal qualities of motivation, desire to succeed, looking forward to the future, self-esteem, and a positive attitude were the key ingredients to a successful, resilient ED student. Results from Teacher Survey Question 3 revealed that teachers felt the number one indicator of academically unsuccessful ED students was general attitude. Forty-two percent of teachers ranked general attitude as number one, and 31% ranked it as number two. General attitude was noted important in both interviews and surveys.

Support at Home was documented as Theme 2 in teacher interviews with evidence noted in four of the twelve interview questions. In Teacher Survey Questions 4,

6, 7, and 9, the majority of teachers included support at home in their answers. Teacher Survey Question 2 asked teachers to rank places that most impacted the students' resilience. Ranking synthesis showed the number one place teachers believed impacted resilient ED students the most was the home. Ninety-six percent of teachers felt it was the number one place of impact, and 4% ranked it second; this accounted for all teachers. Teacher Survey Question 1 on the survey revealed that teachers felt having parents with good parenting skills was the most important attribute; 73% ranked it as the most important, 12% ranked it as the second most important, and 15% ranked it as third most important. One hundred percent of teachers ranked good parenting skills within the top three attributes. Support at home was noted important in both interviews and surveys.

Theme 3 of teacher interviews, Family Structure, also had evidence noted in the teacher survey. Teacher Survey Question 1 asked teachers to rank family factors that they believed affected the academic success of students and made them resilient. Teachers felt that living in a home with both biological parents was a major contributor to resilience and academic success of ED students, second only to good parenting skills, which falls into Theme 2.

### **Credibility, Dependability, Trustworthiness, and Transferability**

In seminal work, Lincoln and Guba (1985) took the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity and coined the word *trustworthiness*. To evaluate the trustworthiness of a study, the study needed credibility (confidence in the findings), transferability (findings transferrable to other contexts), dependability (findings consistent and reproducible), and confirmability (findings free from researcher bias and formed by respondents). While Lincoln and Guba (1985) deemed trustworthiness as the goal of research, Yin (1994) considered trustworthiness as the standards by which to test

the research design quality.

Ary et al. (2006) categorized five types of evidence, including “structural corroboration, consensus, referential or interpretive adequacy, theoretical adequacy, and control of bias” (p. 504), which help enhance credibility of qualitative studies. This study aimed at structural corroboration by using different sources of data in the forms of interviews, surveys, and document analysis from different groups to attain perspectives from three sides: parent, student, and teacher. Once data gathering was completed, the researcher provided raw data in the form of survey results to a colleague in the field of education; discussions followed, and consensus about conclusions was reached. Low-inference descriptors, or direct quotations, gathered from interviews and audio recorded were used in the study. Self-reflection, or reflexivity, was used to ensure bias was controlled.

External validity is achieved by thick description, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), and rich details help to make the study more transferable to other groups of people, settings, and situations. Ary et al. (2006) remarked that quantitative research deemed external validity as the degree to which the findings are generalizable; however, qualitative research usually does not have generalizability. Therefore, the qualitative researcher has a “responsibility to provide sufficiently rich, detailed, thick descriptions of the context so that potential users can make the necessary comparisons and judgments about similarity and hence transferability (Ary et al., 2006, p. 507).

Ryle (1949) is credited with first using the term *thick description*. In 1997, Holloway added that the details provided by thick description allow the researcher to identify cultural and social patterns and put those patterns in appropriate context. Tellis (1997) concurred that details from the participants’ viewpoints and multiple sources of

data helped with validity. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) deemed that ethics and methodology have equal importance due to the nature of the personal interaction. To provide thick descriptions without crossing the line of being unethical, Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) suggested contextualizing, narrativizing, and focusing on the concrete issues. This case study tried to include rich details by using parent, student, and teacher interviews and by using the exact words of the participants.

Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) concluded, “[Q]ualitative research is iterative rather than linear, so that a good qualitative researcher moves back and forth between design and implementation to ensure congruence among question formulation, literature, recruitment, data collection strategies, and analysis” (p. 10). As this study unfolded, the researcher moved freely among the chapters, adding to each chapter what had been discovered. New information from interviews led to additions to the literature review, and the study’s chapters and topics changed to meet the needs of the research acquired.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study aimed to add to the body of research regarding economically disadvantaged students who were academically successful. Three perspectives, parent, student, and teacher, were investigated in order to find commonalities and differences in perceptions of why some Caucasian students are academically resilient. The Caucasian subgroup was chosen due to the fact that it had the lowest graduation rate of all subgroups in the school being studied.

### Answers to Research Questions

The following questions guided the writer in this research project:

**Research question 1.** *What aspects of parenting do parents of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their children's success?*

In this case study, interviews with parents yielded four themes: Family Routines, Support, Values and Commitments, and Faith. Instead of parents emphasizing the need and importance to establish family routines to aid students in their academics, the opposite actually occurred. Parents admitted to establishing no set routines with bedtimes, homework, or study. Because they had not set routines and had so many children to keep track of, parents did not feel the need to establish routines for academics.

Support from family members and from teachers was a major contributing factor to their children's academic success, according to the parents. Teacher support was noted, but the overwhelming evidence of support was of the grandfather, Papaw. Both parents recognized the invaluable support of the grandparent not only with helping to transport children to places, but also with showing true interest and concern regarding

every aspect of the children's lives.

Values and commitments were continually discussed, not so much as things to be beaten into children's minds through words, but to be things lived so that children could see values and commitments in action. The overarching theme and importance to parents in this case study was one of faith, and all other important aspects could really be under the umbrella of faith and the importance of walking the faithful path of a Christian every day.

**Research question 2.** *What do students of one Caucasian ED family report as being most significant in their success?*

A synthesis of all of the student data from the case study suggested that the participants felt most strongly about things and people they had in their lives, namely, supportive parents (Theme 1), teachers, (Theme 2) other adults (Theme 3), and faith in God (Theme 5). Participants felt that having people who taught by example was the most important support and having people around them whom they trusted and loved them unconditionally was also important. Most participants stressed how much their grandfather, Papaw, had supported them emotionally and academically over the years. Interestingly, most participants spoke freely about how being a Christian and wanting to please God made them give their best efforts in school.

As far as personal characteristics were concerned, students in the case study felt that the most important personal qualities they had for success was being willing to be responsible for their actions and being respectful of themselves and others. Students, suggesting a sense of humility and unwillingness to be the center of attention, did not expound upon personal qualities. Very few participants made boastful statements of personal qualities that were not in some way attributed to someone or something else.

To students in the case study, the abilities to find someone to help them when they needed it and to find ways to solve problems were important. Comments pertaining to Themes 4 and 6, Ideas about Unsuccessful Students and Advice to Unsuccessful Students, respectively, also held indirect personal actions and problem solving ideas through giving advice to others.

**Research question 3.** *What do teachers think enables some Caucasian ED students to be resilient?*

Teachers felt that Personal Student Qualities, Support at Home, Support Outside the Home, and Family Structure were the most important aspects that contributed to student achievement. Personal Student Qualities of motivation, desire to succeed, looking forward to the future, self-esteem, and a positive attitude were the key ingredients to a successful, resilient ED student. Teachers felt that Support at Home, including good parenting skills, was the defining place impacting academic achievement. Family Structure and having both biological parents in the home was a major contributor to success, as noted by teachers.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Parents and students indicated that faith in God was the major contributor to student academic success. The overarching theme, according to parents and students, was one of living faith daily and letting everything else branch from those beliefs and actions. Students from this case study did recognize that their parents were living examples of God's Word, and parents noted how important it was to impress upon children the need for faith and adherence to Christian beliefs and attitudes. However, teachers did not recognize faith as being a major contributor to students' academic success.

Parents, students, and teachers all agreed that support, whether from a teacher, adult outside the family, or family member, was a major contributor to student academic success. Students and parents both spoke freely about the vital role that the grandfather, Papaw, played in the success of the students, and although teachers did not specify a person per se, teachers did acknowledge the importance of support people.

Parents and students agreed on personal characteristics necessary for an ED student to be academically successful. The students' belief in the willingness to be responsible for actions and being respectful corroborated the teachers' opinions on the necessity of motivation, desire to succeed, and a positive attitude.

Although teachers felt that having both biological parents in the home was a major contributor to success, neither parents nor students spoke about this attribute. One possible reason is that students and parents in this case study are a part of an intact family and are not personally familiar with the issues attached to any other family structure. Likewise, parents and children did not speak of the family size as a negative; rather, they viewed the family size as a positive. One possible reason is that this large family size is all that any of them have ever known.

### **Connections to Previous Research and Theoretical Framework**

According to previous research, one of the most frequently noted predictors of students dropping out of public high school in the United States is low socioeconomic status (SES) of the family (Bachman et al., 1971; Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Christle et al., 2007; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Gruskin et al., 1987; Rumberger, 1983; Weis et al., 1989). According to Sirin (2005), “[P]arents’ location in the socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on students’ academic achievement” (p. 418), because income level helps determine SES, which determines the school, environment, home resources,



communication between home and school, and rank in society.

This case study did not support Sirin's claims. Teachers in this study did delineate negatives associated with low family SES and the impacts on academic achievement. However, parents and students did not seem to place as much importance on the amount of money available to the family. This may be due in part to the fact that the family in this case study has never know any other level of SES and has learned coping mechanisms to offset the negatives associated with low SES. Also, money and material things did not seem to be a focus of the family, so the lack of money would not affect them as much as others who are more focused on money, or the lack of it.

A negative relationship between number of children and academic success has traditionally been found (Blake, 1981; Downey, 1995; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Xu, 2008), and Blake (1981) is credited with coining the term *resource dilution*, family resources divided among children that drive intellectual development. This case study did not corroborate these findings, but consideration should be taken in regard to the family itself. Purposive sampling yielded the family for the case study that fit the needs of the study, namely, an intact Caucasian family with children who were all academically successful. Therefore, the choice of family with a large, academically successful sibship predetermined the fact that the study would not support the resource dilution model and the fact that the study would support the claim of Guo and VanWey (1999a): the size of the family does not negatively affect intellectual development.

After assessing "the effects of family formation on children" (Amato, 2005, p. 75), Amato suggested that family structure affects children through their adult lives and that children in homes with both biological parents have many advantages that those who live with only one parent do not. This case study included two grown children who did

not live in the parents' home and were married, and comments from those two grown children supported Amato's premise that family structure affects people throughout their adult lives. Because the family has only ever known the situation of a large, intact Caucasian family, a fair judgment cannot be made as to the extent of the advantages associated with their family type and structure.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) delineated categories of students by the maternal level of education when charting grade point average and levels of parental monitoring of activities outside the home. Results indicated that the child living with both biological parents who frequently monitored the child's activities and whose mother had an education beyond high school had definite academic advantages (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). According to Noack (2004), the level of education of parents is a good predictor of a child's academic success. This case study involved a mother and father who both had earned four-year degrees from a university and who were both actively involved in monitoring their children's activities; therefore, the study supports Bronfenbrenner's and Noack's concepts.

Parental involvement and support has been found to play a major role in mitigating a child's high-risk background; a nurturing relationship with at least one parent greatly impacts the ability of a child to overcome adverse family life (Bradley et al., 1994; Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Wyman et al., 1991). Christenson et al. (1997) contended that parental behavior and attitudes were more important than SES to academic achievement. This case study suggested that positive parenting, including parental involvement and support, does help children overcome issues associated with low SES, as the parents of the family had instilled values diminishing money and material items in their children. This case study corroborated the 2007 Harvard Family

Research Project's views on the importance of the family involvement process.

This study confirmed Werner's 1955 Kauai Longitudinal Study that included three areas of protective factors: factors within the person, factors in the family, and factors in the community (Werner, 2005). Werner's study revealed that the families had stability and values reported to be associated with religious beliefs. Although teachers did not associate academic success with religious beliefs, parents and students gave most of the credit for the academic success of their family to their faith in God and willingness to follow His Word.

Spagnola and Fiese (2007) found that daily routines associated with behavior monitoring encourage academic success because parents are aware of the child's homework; behavior monitoring in a routine basis discourages risky behavior, as the child knows that the parents are paying attention to actions. The family involved in this case study did not have set routines, as previously anticipated, but the children were obviously aware that their parents monitored their actions. The sense of responsibility noted by the children agreed with Werner's finding that a sense of being responsible for tasks or people or pets helped promote a feeling of "required helpfulness" (Werner, 1984) and desire to please God seemed to guide the children, not having a sense of routine.

To further ideas about personal qualities of resilient students, McMillan and Reed (1994) observed that individual traits of successful at-risk students consisted of several qualities, including being intrinsically motivated and in control; wanting to succeed and positive about the world; choosing to work hard and succeed; taking credit for success; being hopeful, positive, and optimistic about the future; and, not blaming circumstances. This case study supported the list of traits identified by McMillan and Reed (1994). These young people also had a supportive adult outside the family and/or were involved

in interests outside the family (Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Werner, 1987). Parents and students noted the importance of Papaw and other adults in their lives, and some children spoke of being involved in sports.

In addition, resilient adolescents thrive when the parental figure or adult outside the family has high expectations for the student (Garmezy, 1985; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten et al., 1990). Although parents expressed the desire for children to do their best in academics, the sense of high expectations seemed to be driven by the success of older siblings and the desire to please God.

The study by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Grotberg, 1995) outlined three sources of resilience. External supports included trusting relationships, structure and rules at home, role models, encouragement to be autonomous, and access to needed services. Internal supports included feeling lovable and having an even temperament; being loving, empathic, and altruistic; being proud of him/her self; being autonomous and responsible; and being filled with hope, faith, and trust. Social and interpersonal skills included thinking they can accomplish things to promote their own success, communicating, problem solving, managing feelings and impulses, gauging personal temperament and that of others, and having trusting relationships (Grotberg, 1995). Interviews with students supported the importance of all of these qualities.

As far as teachers are concerned Oswald et al. (2003) surmised that teachers associate certain variables with resilient students, including having stable relationships with peers, good problem solving and thinking skills, realistic goals, sense of self-efficacy, some success, good communication skills, the ability to accept responsibility, and a strong attachment to at least one caring adult. The teachers involved in this study agreed with the importance of these student variables and added the significance of

having both biological parents in the home.

For theoretical framework, this study focused on individual resilience, using the definition summarized by VanBreda (2001, p. 1): “[R]esilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable them to rise above adversity,” combined with the definition of Educational Resiliency: “the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences” (Wang et al., 1994, p. 46). This study confirmed that strengths and coping mechanisms of these children and this family helped to offset the negatives usually associated with low SES. If being in the low SES group is an adversity, this family did not acknowledge it. Rather, they were more focused on faith and God’s expectations of them and on what they had, not what they did not have.

The list of protective factors by Masten (2009) included attachments to positive role models, feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, feelings of hope and meaningfulness of life, faith and religious affiliations, bonds to good schools, and supportive communities and cultures. This case study corroborated Masten’s list and recognized the students’ interactions with different environments, as noted by the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The outcomes of this study suggest other areas for future research. This case study involved an intact family. Other families with different structures, such as only one biological parent or no biological parents, could be studied to determine similarities and differences in structure. The family in this case study was Caucasian because the Caucasian group at the researcher’s school posted the lowest graduation rate of all

subgroups; however, other Caucasian families and families of other ethnicities could be studied to find similarities and differences. For example, intact, ED families from specific demographic groups, such as African American, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islander, could be studied to compare degrees of resiliency and similarities or differences in support systems.

The sibship size of this family was large with eight children. Different sizes of families could be studied to find the negatives and positives associated with sibship size. Likewise, families with children of different gender make-ups could be studied to observe the effects of children's gender on resilience; the family in this study had four males and four females. Studies dealing with birth order and resiliency could also be performed and compared to the family in this study, which had four males born first and four females born last.

One of the main findings of this study involved the importance of Christian beliefs and faith in regard to academic achievement, and this finding was unanticipated. Future research could include different religious groups, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, and those who do not believe in God. Studies could also be done delineating the similarities and differences in monotheistic and polytheistic religious belief and the effects on academic achievement. Areas could account for the importance of church attendance, type of faith, and the extent to which Christian beliefs should be included in public education. Students who attend private Christian schools or private nondenominational schools could also be studied to determine if a correlation exists between faith and academic achievement.

### **Shortcomings and Limitations of the Study**

According to Ary et al. (2006), qualitative research has inherent ethical issues,

which may place limitations on the study. The kind of information gleaned from the study may be very personal or may be illegal; this study did delve into personal information, but only to the degree that the participants were willing to go, and the subject was not an intensely personal one. No illegal activity occurred in relation to the study, and no information was found to be about illegal activities. The researcher has taken into consideration the relationship to the participants and was careful not to cross the line of IE/IR when interviewing. Reciprocity was considered, and a donation was made to the family's school system in their names. Lastly, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the IRB, and no amendment was needed.

This case study focused on one resilient Caucasian ED family and their students. Because so much research focuses on minorities, this study attempted to add to the body of knowledge of Caucasians. If more families could be included, shortcomings would be lessened. Also, the findings could be compared with other ethnicities to determine the differences and similarities. Some may argue that the Caucasian subgroup makes this study not as interesting; however, because the problem at the researcher's school dealt with this particular subgroup and not a minority group, this narrowing of ethnicity was necessary to reap the needed information.

This study may not be generalizable to ages other than high school and to areas of resilience that do not deal with school. Because the focus was on a specific ethnicity, Caucasian, generalizability may be lost to other ethnicities. Because the study concerned an intact family of ten with both parents living in the home, the study may not relate to one-parent families, to households where no biological parents are present, or to families with smaller or larger sibship size. Findings in a larger, more rural school, more urban school, different levels of economically disadvantaged students, or private school may

vary due to changing variables.

### **Implications of the Study**

This case study has implications for parents, students, teachers, and school systems. As far as parents are concerned, parenting factors can mitigate the belief of having fewer children in order to give them more time and money and to avoid resource dilution. Making the choice for the mother to stay home with the children may put the family in a lower socioeconomic bracket, but not being concerned with material things and money diminishes the adverse effects. If money is not a central concern of the family, and the children are taught this premise, then the absence of money and the lower SES is not the main contributing factor in academic achievement. Parenting that includes being positive role models and teaching the importance of Christian faith and God seems to trump all other issues.

### **Conclusion**

Students may be resilient and not even realize it, especially if they have not viewed their circumstances as something to be concerned about. Beliefs in God and Christian faith have a strong influence over the whole child, and this translates into an importance of doing well in school to please God. Coping mechanisms may be a part of daily life and are not necessarily viewed as something above and beyond what any other student would do.

Public school teachers and school systems may not associate the importance of Christian faith with academic achievement of ED students, and this may be tied to the interpretation of separation of church and state and the current restrictions of public education. As suggested by parents and children of this case study, Christian faith and belief in God have the most profound effects on academic achievement. If this premise



were generalizable to other families, the foundation of public school requiring the absence of religion would be questioned.

To serve ED student populations better and reduce the dropout rate of this subgroup, schools must have a focus on issues associated with low SES and have people and systems in place to support this group. The ED subgroup has many variations of problems associated with family structure, parental education and involvement, and student perceptions. To properly address specific situations for different schools, data should be used to pinpoint areas of individual school need and use time, talent, and treasure to approach these issues.

If graduation rate continues to be one of the main hurdles for schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress, schools will need to be creative in the use of resources to support the subgroups with the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout rates. Encouraging parent involvement, providing support to students who do not have support at home, and implementing programs to educate parents can have positive impacts on students and their families. However, social issues associated with a lack of responsibility of the parents and an increasing required responsibility of the schools must be addressed from a legal standpoint. If parents are not held responsible for the rearing of their children and compulsory education continues, schools cannot be held to such a high level of responsibility. The deeper societal problems may lie in the role Christian faith plays, or does not play, the responsibilities of the parents, the responsibilities of the students, and the length to which schools should go to rear children.

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent**



## Appendix A: Informed Consent

**Consent Form**  
Resilient Qualities of Students  
*Kim Hawkins*  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of academically successful students who are/were economically disadvantaged. You were selected as a participant because of the success of your children or your own success. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Kim Hawkins, Liberty University School of Education.

### **Background Information**

The purpose of this project is to study academically successful economically disadvantaged students from one intact Caucasian family in hopes of finding resilient qualities and factors affecting success.

### **Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:  
Participation during first month – 1 interview and 1 survey per parent and per child  
Participation during subsequent months – as needed and agreed upon by all parties in advance  
Study to end in July 2010

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The risks associated with this study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. All information will be completely confidential and not traceable to participants. The benefits of being in the study include helping to identify things said and done in the home to promote resilient, successful students.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept private and will only be used for educational purposes. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Anything audio taped will be transcribed and saved; the original audio will be saved under date only. After the study has been completed and published, all records will be stored in one master file on a secured flash drive.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Kim Hawkins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at Alcoa High School, 865-982-4631 ext. 114, khawkins@alcoaschools.net

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. If I had any questions, I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of parent or guardian: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
*(If minors are involved)*

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

**Request for Consent to Use Content**

## Appendix B: Request for Consent to Use Content

Dear Colleagues at the Bernard van Leer Foundation:

While researching resilient qualities of economically disadvantaged students for my dissertation, I discovered your information from The International Resilience Project, specifically Edith Grotberg's "A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit." The statements found in the I HAVE, I AM, I CAN would be a perfect to use with the two students who are the focus of my research. My dissertation is on the differences between resilient and non-resilient high school economically disadvantaged students with a focus on family life, teacher and student perception, and the role of religious belief.

With your permission, I would like to use those statements and have the students rank them from most important/most applies to them (5) to least important/least applies to them (1). I will also give an option of a zero (0) for anything that does not apply to them.

I know that the website states, "Copyright is held jointly by the authors and the Foundation. Unless otherwise stated, however, papers may be quoted and photocopied for non-commercial purposes without prior permission. Citations should be given in full, giving the Foundation as source." I would appreciate your consent, would give your credit for the work, and would be happy to share my results with you.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kim Hawkins  
Liberty University  
skhawkins@liberty.edu  
865.982.4631

**Appendix C**  
**Permission to Use Content**

## Appendix C: Permission to Use Content

### Consent to Use Content

**RE: Email from Bernard van Leer Foundation website**

Dongen, Jan van [Jan.vanDongen@bvleerf.nl]

You replied on 1/5/2009 8:08 AM.

**Sent:** Monday, January 05, 2009 4:37 AM

**To:** Hawkins, Stephanie Kim

**Cc:** Hartman, Jane [Jane.Hartman@bvleerf.nl]

Dear Kim Hawkins,

With apologies for the delay in our reply, we hereby grant you permission to use the "I have, I can, I am" statements in your dissertation questionnaire.

Please be sure to acknowledge the source:

Grotberg, E. (1995) A guide to promoting resilience in children: Strengthening the human spirit. Practice and Reflections 8. The Hague, the Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Thank you for your interest in our work.

Best regards,

Jan van Dongen

Publishing Manager

Bernard van Leer Foundation

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**Appendix D**  
**Student Characteristic Survey**

## Appendix D: Student Characteristic Survey

### The International Resilience Project (Grotberg, 1995)

Please rank the statements in each of the three areas from most important to your academic success (5) to least important to your academic success (1).

#### 1. I HAVE

\_\_\_\_\_ People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what

\_\_\_\_\_ People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble

\_\_\_\_\_ People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things

\_\_\_\_\_ People who want me to learn to do things on my own

\_\_\_\_\_ People who help me when I am sick, in danger, or need to learn

#### 2. I AM

\_\_\_\_\_ A person people can like and love

\_\_\_\_\_ Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern

\_\_\_\_\_ Respectful of myself and others

\_\_\_\_\_ Willing to be responsible for what I do

\_\_\_\_\_ Sure things will be all right

#### 3. I CAN

\_\_\_\_\_ Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me

\_\_\_\_\_ Find ways to solve problems that I face

\_\_\_\_\_ Control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous

\_\_\_\_\_ Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action

\_\_\_\_\_ Find someone to help me when I need it



**Appendix E**  
**Teacher Interview Questions**

## Appendix E: Teacher Interview Questions

1. Please state how long have you been in education and your current position.
2. How (in what capacities) do you work with economically disadvantaged (ED) students and parents?
- 3 Do you do home visits? If so, please describe a typical home visit.
4. What do you think is the number one thing that prevents economically disadvantaged (ED) students from graduating?
5. What do you think is the number one predictor of high school dropouts?
6. What do you think enables some ED students to be resilient (thrive despite their socioeconomic status)?
7. If you had to describe the typical home situation of ED students who are NOT successful, what would it be?
8. If you had to describe the typical home situation of ED students who ARE successful, what would it be?
9. When ED students are not successful, what do you think is the key ingredient missing in the home?
10. If you had to describe qualities of a typical unsuccessful ED student, what would those qualities be?
11. If you had to describe qualities of a typical successful ED student, what would those qualities be?
12. Is there anything I have not covered that you think we should add?

**Appendix F**  
**Teacher Survey**

## Appendix F: Teacher Survey

1. What makes ED students resilient and academically successful?

Rank the following FAMILY factors in order of importance from most important (7) to least important (1).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Two parent Family
- \_\_\_\_\_ Amount of education of parent(s)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Number of children in the family
- \_\_\_\_\_ Daily family routine
- \_\_\_\_\_ Community where family lives
- \_\_\_\_\_ Good parenting skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ Religious belief

2. Which place impacts the academic success of ED students the most?

Rank the following PLACES in order of importance from most important (4) to least important (1).

- \_\_\_\_\_ School
- \_\_\_\_\_ Home
- \_\_\_\_\_ Church
- \_\_\_\_\_ Community

3. Which characteristics are the biggest indicators that Ed students are not academically successful?

Rank the following CHARACTERISTICS in order of importance from most important/biggest indicator (6) to least important/least indicator (1).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Clothes
- \_\_\_\_\_ Grooming
- \_\_\_\_\_ Behavior
- \_\_\_\_\_ Communication skills
- \_\_\_\_\_ General attitude
- \_\_\_\_\_ Attendance