

2008

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**Becoming more resilient: Perceptions of resiliency development education in
post-secondary students**

by

Kristine Myhrwold Meyer

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:

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2008

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to
two important men in my life—
my father and my husband:

Dad, I walk in your stride. This doctorate is yours, too, because it has been a part of your quest since you left college and the seminary. I just completed the final lap. You have given me insight and wisdom in understanding human nature, a love of counseling, and an insatiable curiosity (your favorite thing). You saw the possibility in your middle child and along with Mom, nurtured me to believe I could accomplish anything I set my heart and mind to do. Thank you with every fiber in my being. I love you both.

Donnie (“Poops”), your constant love and encouragement are unmatched. I wish the world could know the incredible support that you have been to me along this fantastic journey. You are my soul mate. I could never have come to this moment without you. When I decided to take the leap, leaving a job I loved, you were there—always positive, seeing the big picture, willing to sacrifice time, comfort, and finances so that I could attain this dream. You are amazing. I love you forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Rationale	4
Background of the study	6
Problem	9
Purpose	11
Research Question	11
Theoretical Framework	12
Epistemology	12
Perspective	13
Methodology	13
Methods	13
Researcher perspective	14
Limitations	17
Definition of Terms	18
Summary	20
Dissertation Organization	20
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	22
Resiliency	23
Definition	23
Historical background	23
Protective factors that support resiliency	27
Resiliency Education	30
Current research – K-12	30
Post-secondary institution research	32
Components for students	33
Protective factors inventory	33
Skills-development model	38
Literature-based model	41
Strength-based model	42
Barriers to student success in the first year of college	46
Final Thoughts	48
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	49
Theoretical Framework	50
Epistemology	50
Theoretical perspective	50

Methodology	52
Methods.....	53
Epoche.....	53
Research site	54
Participants.....	55
Data collection	55
Analysis.....	56
Trustworthiness and Goodness	58
Limitations	59
Delimitations.....	60
Summary	60
Transition	61
CHAPTER 4. MY LIFE IN A BAG AND OTHER STORIES: ON THE ROAD TO RESILIENCY	62
Abstract.....	62
Introduction.....	62
Background of the Study	64
Methodology.....	68
Theoretical framework.....	68
Epistemology	68
Theoretical perspective	68
Methodological approach.....	69
Methods.....	70
Epoche process.....	70
Participants.....	71
Data collection	72
Data analysis and interpretation.....	73
Findings.....	74
Self-story.....	76
Illustrating through folklore.....	79
Illustrating through metaphors.....	81
Discussion.....	84
Conclusion	85
References.....	86
CHAPTER 5. LEARNING IN COMMUNITY: A PASSAGEWAY TO RESILIENCY.....	89
Abstract.....	89
Introduction.....	89
Background of the Study	91
Methodology.....	94
Theoretical framework.....	95
Epistemology	95
Theoretical perspective	95

Methodology.....	96
Methods.....	97
Epoche process.....	97
Participants.....	98
Data collection	99
Data analysis and interpretation.....	100
Findings.....	101
Community	102
Caring relationships	105
High expectations.....	108
Opportunity to participate or contribute	111
Discussion.....	112
Conclusion	114
References.....	114

CHAPTER 6. RESILIENCY DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION:

TRANSFORMATIONAL POSSIBILITIES FOR POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS	117
Abstract.....	117
Introduction.....	117
Background of the Study	119
Methodology.....	122
Theoretical framework.....	122
Epistemology	122
Theoretical perspective	123
Methodology.....	123
Methods.....	125
Epoche process.....	125
Participants.....	126
Data collection	127
Data analysis and interpretation.....	128
Findings.....	129
Awareness.....	129
Self-evaluation	131
Practice.....	135
Autonomy	136
Social competence	136
Sense of purpose	137
Problem-solving skills	137
Change	139
Extension.....	141
Discussion.....	143
Conclusion	145
References.....	145

CHAPTER 7. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS.....	148
General Conclusions	148
Recommendations for Offering Resiliency Development Education.....	151
Implications for Practice	152
Transformational development through RDE.....	153
Stories as pedagogy.....	153
RDE through community-based instruction	155
RDE training for educators	156
Resiliency development for educators	157
Summary	157
Recommendations for Future Research	158
Reflections	160
References.....	163
APPENDIX A. HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL	165
APPENDIX B. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	166
APPENDIX C. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	167
REFERENCES	168
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	175

ABSTRACT

Students leaving home for college face new challenges and adversities as they experience newfound independence. Their abilities to be resilient or to bounce back from various challenges determine their successes as students and eventually throughout life. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of eleven students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) during the first semester of their freshmen year at college and to explore the meaning they discovered in their experience with resiliency education.

The themes ubiquitous within this study were: (1) the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling; (2) the value of learning in community; and (3) the transformative resiliency development of post-secondary student. Thus, the fundamental structure of becoming more resilient, as perceived by the participants, was a self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners, and then intentionally applying the learning to their own lives. This complex statement is potent with possible options to explore for students and educators alike.

This dissertation followed the alternate format that included three journal articles. Each journal article addressed a specific theme apportioned through the data, and which was recognized as key in understanding and applying resiliency in the lives of the participants. The first article addressed the meaning post-secondary students derived from the exposure to storytelling as a medium of instruction in RDE. The second article addresses the impact that learning in community had on the development of resiliency in the participants. The final

article addressed the transformative development that occurred within the participants as they made personal meaning with resiliency through application into their everyday lives.

The responses of the participants supported findings of previous research that resiliency can be taught. A curriculum was introduced, adaptable in nature, to be used at the post-secondary level with the express purpose of introducing resiliency development to college students.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” V. Frankl, 1984

One of the great existential thinkers of our time, Viktor Frankl survived the holocaust in Germany during World War II. He did so at great learning. He wrote in *Man’s search for meaning* (1984), “the experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action” (p. 86). He asserted that there would always be choices to make. Each day offers the opportunity to make decisions that determine how meaning is made of one’s choices and attitudes in dealing with change and challenge.

Students beginning their journey in post-secondary institutions also face change, challenge, and choice. When contemplating the transition to college, students often assume change will be minimal and life will continue for them much as it was during high school with the exception of living quarters and different friends. However, conceptually, it is not supposed to be the same as living at home and going to high school. Students are to leave home and begin their “independent” life. In the past, students were required to lean on the lessons for navigating life that had been learned in the home, in the community, and at school. It used to be that, when a child left home for college, it was a rite of passage—so to speak. Children were expected to “make it on their own,” hard knocks included. It was presumed that they would learn and grow through their experiences into strong, competent people. Parents had done their job and their role now was to be observer—purveyor of wisdom (when asked) and tender of the “home fires” for the occasional visit from their college student. However, today students leave home tethered to their parents through the

umbilical cord of the cell phone, e-mail, and instant messaging (Shih & Allen, 2007). The times of “hard knocks” are seen by many parents as their opportunity to take responsibility, step in, and deter any challenge or adversity in the attempt to “make their child happy.”

Students beginning post-secondary education face a host of new challenges. They must not only adapt to different academic expectations than they were accustomed to in high school, but they must also independently work through the emotional strains that are ever present. Difficulties in adjusting to college life because of homesickness and loneliness are often reported as major arguments for dropping out of college (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

The questions remain as to why so many people facing similar life challenges fail and others rise above the negative impact, and emerge as healthy and productive adults? When confronted with normal life events such as homesickness, a failing grade, or the break-up of a romantic relationship, why do some college students become immobilized from taking responsibility to deal with the challenges and instead skip classes, leave assignments undone, or ultimately quit school? What makes the difference? Is it as Frankl (1984) suggested, a choice to be made in confronting the responses we make to the challenges we face?

There are some possible perspectives found in research that address these questions. Frankl (1984) grappled with a concept known as resiliency, as he reflected upon choices and attitudes that people take toward their life experiences. In social terms, resiliency is defined as “the ability to bounce back” (Benard, 1993, p. 44) or “to recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune” (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001, p. 7). Researchers (Benard, 1993; Masten, 2001; Wolin & Wonlin, 1993) identified characteristics that could be found in

resilient people. These characteristics are often referred to as “protective factors” (Benard, 1993).

In order to better understand resiliency among post-secondary students, it is necessary to learn and understand the factors that are a part of their reality. Among the variables affecting the resiliency of post-secondary students are the affluence of American society, the tendency for parents to “hover” over their college age children, becoming too involved with their decisions and issues, and a sense of “entitlement” into which youth today seem to have grown (Lasch, 1979; Rosen, 2005; White, 2005). Because of this intense “hovering” over every aspect of their children’s lives, these parents have been dubbed “helicopter parents” (Shih & Allen, 2007, p. 90). Personal communication technologies, such as instant messaging and cell phones, enable parents to closely track their children’s academic, sports and leisure activities. This generation of parents expects the needs of their children to be promptly attended to (by college personnel) and do not hesitate becoming vocally and physically involved (Meunier & Wolf, 2006).

Institutions of learning continue to seek ways to affect the adjustment and eventual success of their students. Resiliency research, with its emphasis on understanding how people respond to negative experiences, has often focused on the lives of “at risk” children who have experienced poverty, abuse, physical handicaps, war, mental illness, alcoholism, or the criminality of their parents (Benard, 1993). Researchers such as Werner and Smith (1982), Benard (1993, 2004), Masten (2001), Wolin and Wolin (1993), and others have identified a laundry list, so to speak, of characteristics found in resilient youth that they dubbed, “protective factors.” These investigators have discovered that one does not need the entire list

of protective factors to be resilient; a little bit of one or more is often enough to contribute to a resilient attitude toward life (Werner & Smith, 1982).

As we continue to identify contemporary needs of students, Benard (2004) outlined what she referred to as “a very simple recipe” (p. 43) that can create an environment that positively affects the resiliency of youth. Though simple, it is not easy. The ingredients that make up an environment that fosters resiliency in students are caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution. These, along with the personal protective factors denoted by Benard (1993, 2004)—social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose—give educators a sense of direction and a beacon of hope in having a positive influence on the journey of a student.

Research has provided an understanding of what young people need in order to be resilient (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Schools and college campuses continue to be concerned with students who have not been able to internalize and identify the protective factors that would help them to move beyond or through the emotional pain and upset that would cause them to act out in insolence, anger, apathy or sometimes violence (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kiracofe & Wells, 2007). We have much to learn about building resilience in students but, perhaps, we need to begin to take what we know and put it into more intentional action within our educational institutions.

Rationale

This study is important because, in today’s society, there are a myriad of life circumstances and events that have the potential to affect the resiliency of a college student. As described previously, the high attachment of today’s “helicopter parent” to their college

student is demanding of college administrators as they constantly deal with unreasonably involved parents calling them to complain about housing assignments, food quality, roommates, and grades (Belt, 2005; White, 2005). Additionally, a larger percentage of high school seniors are seeking degrees at post-secondary institutions because employment today warrants greater technical skills. These students may lack the preparation to deal with the stresses and expectations of college life at a vulnerable time in emotional development (Kiracofe & Wells, 2007). As these students embark on our college campuses toting their bags of vulnerability, it is prudent that colleges address the resiliency of their students and how they are able to respond to their new life challenges. Indeed, this is pertinent because, although litigation processes view post-secondary students as adults who are responsible for their own decisions and actions, some courts have found colleges liable for a medley of issues (White, 2005).

Another possible factor affecting resiliency in today's college student is the affluence that many of those living in the United States have enjoyed as a result of our economic advantages over the past decades. This has given today's students access to an abundance of material possessions and conveniences (Lasch, 1979; Rosen, 2005). Many of these students have grown up without knowing a sense of "need." Therefore, an attitude of entitlement is often evident (Rosen, 2005). Similarly, because of the access to material goods and conveniences and with the sense of entitlement permeating our society, we have seen a rise in the involvement of parents in every aspect of their children's lives, often to the point of excluding them from any opportunity to learn responsibility or attributes of resiliency (Gibbs, 2005; Meunier & Wolf, 2006).

In *The road less traveled*, Scott Peck (1979) remarked that life is difficult. When we become so caught up in finding ways to make life easy, a constant pleasure and a utopia on earth, we forget that the reality is to deal with the lumps in the path as well. In our bygone society, isolated from the throngs of the multitudes, parents took seriously the responsibility of instilling in their children the characteristics, skills, and values necessary in order to navigate through life's hardships. Today, families are inundated with demands on time and mental energy. More and more of the responsibilities needed to raise children into healthy, adjusted, and productive adults have fallen to the institutions of education (Lasch, 1979; Rosen, 2005). Time does not march in reverse. Educators now have the responsibility to do all that is possible to ensure that students are given the opportunity to grow into healthy, happy, and productive adults. Resiliency development education (RDE) has confirmed support of this endeavor.

Background of Study

It was during a meeting of the Academic Standards Committee, at a midsized Midwestern university, that discussion began focusing on concerns raised when reviewing written requests to be reinstated after a period of dismissal from the university for lack of satisfactory academic progress. As committee members discussed the requests they began observing a repeated pattern among students who had been dismissed. More often than not they found students responding to adverse situations in their lives with devastation and an inability to grasp perspective. The issues seemed to "get in their way" and would result in poor class attendance, missed assignments, poor workmanship and, oftentimes, dropping out of the class. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the students had not developed any

productive strategies to address life challenges. The insight into this perplexing trend prompted one of the committee members to suggest this area as a Capstone experience for this researcher. [In the Capstone experience, students use their knowledge, skills, and abilities in a specific problem-based situation with a public or private sector organization. The purpose of the Capstone was twofold: (1) to engage students in doing educational leadership; and (2) to collaboratively support educational organizations with assistance in addressing a need (Iowa State University: Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 2007)].

The project explored how to encourage students to rise above those adverse situations and work through them in a healthy productive manner. In essence, I was curious as to how to help students to grow in resiliency.

Research supports the premise that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Awareness of the factors that characterize a resilient person can only enhance the probability of an individual reacting in a resilient way when an adverse situation arises. Therefore, the learning component about resiliency development for post-secondary students contained opportunities to understand, internalize, and “try on” resiliency. Just as learning strategies involved in knowing the protocols of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) so well that they become an automatic response, the goal of teaching resiliency development enabled students to internalize the nature of resilient behaviors and characteristics so that they, too, would be an automatic response when adversity materializes. The ultimate goal was to provoke an understanding of resilient behaviors and, therefore, a desire to augment positive choices of response in the face of difficult life challenges.

Understanding the student experience and perception after exposure to RDE could lead to tactical undertakings in resiliency education at the college level that have the potential to greatly impact retention. In his book, *College attrition at American research universities: Comparative case studies*, Joseph C. Hermanowicz (as cited in Braxton, 2004) noted that, in universities with the lowest rate of attrition, there seems to be nurtured a “culture of enforced success”. Hermanowicz revealed that the salient characteristic on these college campuses was a fervent belief in the promise of all students.

My Capstone experience consisted of writing a curriculum for a six-week unit on resiliency development for college freshmen. Part of the curriculum was implemented in a freshman class through an orientation seminar at a Midwestern university. Four sessions were taught to 47 first-semester freshmen. The sessions involved a variety of activities and learning components focused on internalizing an understanding of resiliency as well as an opportunity for a self-discovery of protective factors. The students learned about the protective factors through a potpourri of learning strategies. Stories and metaphors were a major focus of the class because of the power a story has to imprint an image and provide clarity of understanding. There were continual checks for understanding and opportunity to reflect and share about the learning experience.

The curriculum written for my Capstone Experience was designed as a tool to engage students in the awareness and development of resiliency. While it was being taught to a group of freshmen students, it became evident that changes were beginning to occur. Although the encounters with the students were brief, I was able to see that attitudes and behaviors were being affected by the exposure to resiliency education. Because of these observations, I wanted to know more about how these students made meaning of resiliency in

their lives and how they described the affect on their attitudes and behaviors when facing challenges.

RDE has the potential to be helpful in a variety of sectors. For example, educators, academic advisors, and rehabilitation facilities will benefit from the outcomes because it allows learning new and constructive behaviors and habits. Making meaning of resiliency in their lives is ultimately up to the students. Through RDE, students have the opportunity to discover and enhance strengths that reinforce their resiliency.

Problem

During implementation of the resiliency development curriculum I began to notice a shift in the attitudes and behaviors within a number of the students. The changes were positive, with a sense of profound meaning to them. The students were exhibiting thinking and behaviors that reflected the components of resiliency. One student wrote:

I learned so much! I didn't realize I used all of these factors to protect myself in tough times. I think being aware of these protective factors and how they affect me will help me cope more with setbacks and help to get back on top.

Another student reported: *I love this class because I am learning a multitude of skills that will help me be a better learner throughout my life. I am learning today what will affect the actions and decisions I make of every tomorrow.*

Still another student who was talkative and unengaged at the start of the class, revealed how he now saw a way to channel his creativity with new purpose. He did not always express his new understanding of resiliency in words, but the change in his attention during class and his respectful demeanor gave me a sense that there was a new perspective growing within him.

The ability to teach students to be resilient has been explored in many aspects of student development in children. Researchers have determined that children can be taught to be resilient (Benard, 2004; Henderson, 1997; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). However, there is not a strong body of literature concerning the development of resiliency within post-secondary students.

Social and academic adjustment to college life is relevant to college officials because of the pertinence it has in affecting student retention, academic success, and persistence in college (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). When students have utilized counseling services at the college level, the effects on retention, academic success and the tendency to persevere has been positive (Bishop, 1990; Schwitzer, Grogan, Kaddoura, & Ochoa, 1993). In a study conducted by DeStefano, Mellott, and Peterson (2001), it was revealed that counseling provided to college students on campus had a broad-based effect on students by assuaging personal, emotional, and social adjustment. In comparing models of resiliency education suggested for students (Benard, 2004; Masten, 2001; Miller, Brehm, & Whitehouse, 1998; Read, 1999; Sagor, 1996), the components, such as relationship building, self-knowledge (autonomy), problem solving/conflict resolution strategies, reframing situations for a more positive perspective, and using self-talk tactics (Benard, 2004; Seligman, 1990; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), are not really different from those used to address social and academic issues in the college counseling centers (Lawrence, Ashford, & Dent, 2006; Sharkin, 2004).

There seems to be a need for students at the college level to be exposed to information about the facets of resiliency at in a larger context, such as in the classroom, which can affect the way they recover from adverse and challenging situations. It is important that students be equipped to face the challenges of adult life, requiring the ability

to adapt to changing situations and the need to think critically and independently (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Love & Guthrie; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Schlossberg, 1989).

With excitement and intrigue as a result of the feedback from these students after experiencing resiliency education, I decided that their newfound meanings warranted further study. I wanted to study why and how this phenomenon of change came about. This study is important because it explored how post-secondary freshmen made meaning about resiliency.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn how students at the post-secondary level made meaning of resiliency in their lives from participation in RDE. For this research study, resiliency is generally defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity or to recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune (Benard, 2004; Creswell, 2003; Henderson, 1997; Pulley & Wakefield, 2001).

Research Question

Can resiliency be learned? There exists an abundance of evidence addressing the effectiveness of resiliency education for children. Research is just beginning to focus on the resiliency of the young adult or the college student. With components of resiliency established by research, questions remain that explore the potential effectiveness of creating a meaningful connection to resiliency in the minds and hearts of students. Upon this query I posed the following questions for this study:

1. How do first semester post-secondary students make personal meaning of resiliency from involvement in resiliency education?

Secondary questions were:

- a. What personal meaning does resiliency have?
- b. How do post-secondary freshmen make meaning of these four selected protective factors that support resiliency:
 - autonomy
 - problem solving skills
 - sense of purpose
 - social competence
- c. How do post-secondary freshmen make meaning of “reframing” in relationship to resiliency?
- d. How do post-secondary freshmen make meaning of “self-talk” in relationship to resiliency?

Theoretical Framework

“The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). As beings in search of meaning and understanding, I construct a framework that allows me to interpret my interactions in coherent and useful ways.

Epistemology

The theoretical framework of this study was based in the epistemology of constructionism. In becoming resilient, one effects meaning from the experiences in life. In the constructionist’s view, meaning is not created by us, but rather we construct it (Crotty, 2003).

Perspective

The theoretical perspective for this study was steeped in interpretivism. The interpretivist approach looks for “culturally-derived and historically-situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 2003, p. 67).

Methodology

The methodology of phenomenology informed this study. The heart of phenomenology is the lived experience (Merriam, 2002). It brings into relationship the conscious subject and the object (Crotty, 2003), in this case, the student and the notion of resiliency. As the researcher, it was important that my focus was not on the humans nor on the human world, but rather on “the essence of the meaning of the interaction” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, conceived phenomenological philosophy as “re-learning to look at the world” (as quoted in Matthews, 2002, p. 46). The goal of this study was to gain a complete understanding of the phenomenon of the students’ experiences of “re-learning to look at the world” after their encounters with RDE.

Methods

Understanding the lived experience is a hallmark of phenomenology (Merriam, 2002). The methods used incorporated two focus group interviews, two individual interviews with all 11 participants, and journal/assignment analysis. Because I was seeking to understand how the students made meaning of resiliency, it was important that the information emerged from them throughout the study (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, to gather the optimal information to formulate the interpretive analysis, I determined that the data were collected using focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis.

By employing the methods of focus groups and individual interviews, it was necessary that I positioned myself strategically in the group as listener and also participant. The purpose was to collect their meanings by focusing on the phenomenon, the experience with resiliency. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured using open-ended questions and therefore inevitably brought personal values into the study. Throughout the process of interpreting the data collected from the participants by engaging in focus groups and interviews, as well as document analysis, I was able to validate accuracy with them and collaborate with peers for review and triangulation (Creswell, 2003).

Because of my understanding and history studying the concept of resiliency, it was important that I bracket my own experiences through the process of *epoche* (Matthews, 2002). The process known as *epoche*, in a phenomenological study, requires that the researcher bracket, or set aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories that might present a bias to the present study (Moustakas, 1995). My background and experiences enabled me to embark on a process to fully understand and appreciate those of the participants in this study (Merriam, 2002).

Researcher perspective

The concept of resiliency has been a passion of mine for a very long time. With a background in school counseling, I had the opportunity to observe first hand not only examples of tremendous resiliency in the face of adversity, but also the effects of a lack of resilience that emerged in the form of depression, malaise, cynicism, and ultimately suicide (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001).

While pursuing my Master's degree (Meyer, 2001), I studied the effects of teaching resiliency to elementary-age students. The research is definitive about the potential to teach resiliency to students in the K-12 age group. I believe I saw the positive results of resiliency education in my previous position.

I remember chatting with a friend at a conference once. She asked me, *Have you suffered? You're always so happy.* Those statements caught me off guard for several minutes. As I reflected, I realized that I had never endured any great traumas in my life to that point. I was a product of a healthy and happy childhood. I had a wonderful marriage, two young healthy children, and my parents and siblings were still alive; yet, neither I nor any close relative had endured a devastating illness or tragedy. So I thought, *Have I suffered?* During that time of introspection, I came to discover that, indeed, I had endured challenges, but not the traumatic suffering involved in death or illness. Since completing my Master's thesis on resiliency, I have endured deaths of close family members, a child with depression, and have, myself, been diagnosed with cancer. I have rebounded from these adversities because I chose to be resilient. I probably would have endured these crises in my life without the background in resiliency, but with that background, I was able to surmount the challenges with confidence and determination to rebound stronger and in the process learn more about myself, and others.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to teach English in China over the course of two summers. It was inspiring to see how their growing economy has brought such changes in lifestyle to its citizens. People now experience a wealth of opportunity to amass possessions, travel, and obtain many different levels of personal power through vocation. Many of them expressed to me that their children are now living "couch potato" lives. By

this they mean that their children, in this society that works hard to enforce a one-child per family rule, have at their disposal many technical toys, and therefore sit in the home all day playing with their “digital masters.” It made me look at the parallel to the United States—a society of plenty. I wondered what the effect will be emotionally, morally, and physically regarding their growth and maturity when showering children with so much without teaching them responsibility to maintain a balance? Will they be resilient when it comes to knowing who they are, what they value, who they can become, and what they can bring to the world? These thoughts are not new. I believe it has been a conundrum of our society from the onset of time. Over 50 years ago, when translating the works of Alfred Adler, Rudolf Dreikurs (1953) wrote: “Nowadays most people brought up in large towns are spoiled children, who measure their happiness and satisfaction only by what they get. This is a grave error, for whom thousands pay in unhappiness and suffering” (p. 6). Yet, we continue striving to learn how we will tender our youth with responsibility for their lives lest they fall into dysfunction and unhappiness.

I am thankful to possess a strong sense of resiliency. Some of the protective factors described in resiliency research evident in my personal characteristics are probably innate, some nurtured, and some chosen. Ultimately we have to choose to nurture those we have that are innate and those that have been instilled through our experience and interaction with others. Because of the fullness of life that I have experienced and my deep love of helping people pursue their potential, the study of resiliency and the opportunity to teach it to college students with the hope of affecting their lives in a positive way is nothing short of exhilarating for me!

With my background in school counseling, I have first hand experience seeing what can happen when resilience is nurtured in children. It is important that we equip not only students, but educators as well, with knowledge and tools of resiliency. It is possible to make a difference in the lives of students by using the tools and techniques described in the literature on resiliency.

I was raised in a home where resiliency was naturally nurtured. Many people have the opportunity to learn it in the home as I have. However, there are many homes where the conditions are not filled with nurturance that promotes the development of resiliency. What excites me about resiliency is exactly what Werner and Smith (1982) revealed in their Kawai study. It does not take much of one or more of the protective factors to grow a resilient person. We who stand along the pathway of youth can and must extend to them opportunities that will nurture the habits of resilience. Girded with that understanding, they will truly, in the words of Viktor Frankl (1984), be equipped to “exercise their freedom of choosing how they will react to what happens to them” (p. 40).

Limitations

In this qualitative study I realized that the data collected from the students occurred near the end of their first semester and right after the beginning of their second semester. The emotions of dealing with semester finals, a long holiday break at home, and the start of new classes had the potential to affect attitudes and perspectives.

Learning about resiliency has been my passion for many years. With a deep understanding of so many different elements of resiliency, it was important for me to critically identify certain assumptions. Not everyone would have such a base of

understanding into the essence of resiliency. In addition, after having been involved in teaching resiliency education to the group of freshmen students, it was imperative that I bracket my biases and level of understanding throughout the analysis process. It was also important for me to utilize a personal journal as a tool of reflexivity so that my conceptions of resiliency did not hinder the information communicated by the participants.

This study encompassed the experiences of a small, specific group of students in a Midwestern university. For this reason, the knowledge and understanding was not generalized to other populations. However, with the results of the study, I hope that it will one day be applicable for a variety of venues.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in this study:

Autonomy: One who is able to think and act independently and seeks a sense of control over his/her environment. Often these people are able to separate themselves from dysfunctional family environments (Benard, 2004).

Environmental protective factors: The basic environmental factors that protect youth from risk, such as caring relationships, high expectations, and the opportunity to participate or contribute (Benard, 2004).

Optimism: Those who tend to believe defeat is just a temporary setback, that its causes are confined to this one case, that defeat is not their fault, and that circumstances, bad luck, or other people brought it about. They are not fazed by defeat (Seligman, 1990).

Personal protective factors: Internal and external attribute that enhance resiliency (Benard, 2004).

Pessimism: Those who tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault (Seligman, 1990).

Problem-solving: The ability to think abstractly and reflectively as well as seeing alternate solutions to problems both cognitive and social. These skills are augmented by the ability to plan, think creatively, and utilize resources (Benard, 2004).

Purpose: Pertains to someone who has goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future (Benard, 2004).

Resiliency: The ability to recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune. One who exhibits characteristics of flexibility, durability, adaptation, buoyancy, elasticity, optimism, and openness to learning. A *lack of resiliency* is signaled by burnout, fatigue, malaise, depression, defensiveness, and cynicism (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001).

Self-story: The self-story is the story one chooses to tell about the events of his or her life that led up to the present. The story can include relationships, events, experiences, trials, successes, lessons learned, choices or mistakes made on the journey, and how each affected the direction of life as it is lived today.

Social competence: The ability to make and retain relationships. Qualities include: responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor (Benard, 2004).

Strengths: That which helps a person to cope with life or that, which makes life more fulfilling for one self and others (Smith, 2006).

Summary

The essence of RDE has the capacity for multiple interpretations dependent upon the background, culture, and personal characteristics of each person who encounters the experience. The components of resiliency, known as protective factors can be purveyed in a variety of ways to students in institutions of learning. This study was important because it focused on the experience of the students who were exposed to RDE. The ramifications of this exposure have the potential to affect student retention, academic success, and emotional and social competence.

The barriers, such as over-involved parents, immaturity, and permeating attitudes of entitlement and consumerism that present in the lives of college students can hinder the ability to deal with challenges that deter resilient choices and independency. It is possible for post-secondary institutions to ameliorate resiliency. By learning about the experiences that students have after participating in RDE I now have a better understanding about providing enhancement to the post-secondary experience that will benefit the students, parents, and institutions.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation was written using the publication (alternate) format. Chapter 1 presents the general introduction, and includes the background, purpose, and rationale of the study. The research question is presented along with the theoretical framework, methodology, limitations and definition of terms. Chapter 2 contains a general review of the literature, focusing on past research on resiliency and resiliency education. The theoretical framework, methodology, participants, data collection and analysis, and limitations and

delimitations are presented in Chapter 3. The three papers submitted for publication are presented in Chapter 4, 5, and 6. Each paper is based on resiliency and resiliency education from a different perspective. Chapter 4 focuses on self-stories and Chapter 5 centers on the aspects of building community. The last paper (Chapter 6) discusses resiliency education and methodology that can be used in post-secondary institutions as well as the transformative outcomes of resiliency education. Chapter 7 concludes with a general summary, findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The legendary English playwright, William Shakespeare, addressed resiliency in his play, *As You Like It*:

*“Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears a precious jewel in his head...”*
(Shakespeare, as cited in Wolin & Wolin, 1993)

What are the “uses of adversity?” Can we boldly call what comes from trauma, heartache, or challenge, “sweet uses of adversity?” According to resiliency research of the last two decades, we can, we do, and we must look to the “sweet uses of adversity” if we want to examine how one can rise from the throes of hard times to survive and grow into something more, something better. Identifying the “sweet uses,” naming them, and confronting them has allowed us to “wear them as a precious jewel on our head.”

The goal of this study was to explore the experience post-secondary freshmen students in response to participation in RDE. The curriculum for the class was written as a part of the Capstone experience. Foundational to the writing of the curriculum was an exhaustive search in the literature as it relates to the notions of resiliency, in particular, the teaching of it to students in an educational setting. Research is clear that the concept of resiliency can be taught. With the abundance of literature available in the area of resiliency, the literature review will be limited to: (a) the history of resiliency research; (b) identifying characteristics of resiliency; (c) components of resiliency education; and (d) barriers to student success in first year college freshmen.

Resiliency

Definition

Resiliency often has been defined as the ability to “bounce back,” successfully adapt to the effects of adversity, and develop a social competence even in the face of severe stress resulting from personal or environmental challenges or trauma (Benard, 1991). Frydenberg (2004) added that it is also the capacity to deal with conflict situations. Some therapists subscribe to the notion of the triple standard as one who, “works well, plays well, loves well, and expects well” when assessing a person’s mental health (Werner & Smith, 1992; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Werner and Smith went on to explain that resilience and protective factors are the positive compliments to both *vulnerability*, the individual’s propensity to an affection, and *risk factors*, those biological or external exposures that lead toward a negative developmental response to challenging or traumatic experiences.

Historical background

Werner and Smith (1982) conducted a landmark longitudinal study following the lives of 698 children born on the island of Kauai in Hawaii. Many of the children, in the study, came from homes where fighting or alcohol, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse often were the norm. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the children grew to be productive and competent adults. Werner and Smith explained the success of the children as a result of “personal traits and protective factors in the environment” (p. 111). Bonnie Bernard (1991) also found after an intense review of literature that 50 (70%) of the

children who were the products of homes as described in the Werner and Smith study grew to be caring, competent, and confident adults.

After studying the inner-city youth in London and rural youth on the island of Wight, Michael Rutter (1985) concluded 25% to be resilient, even though they had experienced many risk factors. He found some of the qualities exhibited by these youth were an easy temperament, being female, self-efficacy, a positive school climate, self-mastery, planning skills, and a warm, close personal relationship with an adult. Similarly, through surveys conducted to determine essential developmental assets in youth, Peter Benson, Galbraith, and Espeland (1998), of the Minneapolis-based Search Institute, found that a healthy, caring relationship with another adult outside one's family provided external support that often leads to resilience.

Probing the resilient nature of humans did not arise from academic-grounded theory, but, in fact, is a result of the phenomenological identification of characteristics of survivors, usually young people, of high environmental, familial, or personal risk situations (Richardson, 2002). Richardson cited three waves of resilient inquiry. The first wave was in response to the question, "What characteristics mark people who will thrive in the face of risk factors or adversity as opposed to those who succumb to destructive behaviors?" (p. 308). The second wave sought to understand and discover the process of attaining the characteristics of a resilient person. The third wave addressed the notion that a motivational energy must be involved after a life disruption to reintegrate oneself back into the norms of living. Resiliency theory seems to grapple with Richardson's "waves of resiliency" in uncovering the energy he describes. There are many names given to these characteristics, but they all seem to point in the direction of positive living.

Responses to adversity have almost always involved emotion. Resiliency often is exhibited in persons who know how their emotions affect their thinking and their reactions to events in their lives. Daniel Goleman (1995) wrote in his book, *Emotional intelligence*, about the brain's functions in all our lives. He described the working of the neocortex as the seat of thought. This part of the brain contains centers that combine and understand what the senses perceive. The evolution of the neocortex in *Homo sapiens*, according to Goleman, made great strides in our ability, as human beings, to survive adversity because it allows a person to plan long term, strategize and perform other mental exercises. The thinking brain, or neocortex, evolved from the emotional brain, the limbic system. Because of this there are a myriad of connections between the emotions and the neocortex. Therefore, emotion will almost always be able to influence thought and reason in some way.

Much of resiliency research has been aimed at the younger population, primarily elementary- and adolescent-aged children. Very little research, however, has been conducted on adults. Few investigations have been conducted to follow high risk populations of children and youth into adulthood to observe and record the long lasting effects of risk and protective factors that are functioning during their earlier development (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, and Nelson (1995) observed that when adults are exposed to traumatic events during their lifetime, most seem to overcome their travesties and continue living productive lives. Because most of the research has been done on those who seek treatment for trauma and loss, Bonanno (2004) contended that we continue to know little about the process of resilient adaptation in adulthood. Although science has gained much understanding into the pathologies of human psychology and reactions to environmental, social, and behavioral stressors, the way humans respond positively and

constructively to those stressors and experiences largely has been ignored. However, it is refreshing to note that researchers are finally beginning to advocate diverting attention from disease and pathology to positive adaptation in response to stress (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006).

As stated previously, Werner and Smith (1992) acknowledged that little research existed that explored adult resiliency or the long-term effect of adverse childhoods on adaptation to adulthood. In their book, *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*, Werner and Smith (1992) examined research that studied the effects on adults who had experienced economic hardships, high crime in neighborhoods, serious care giving deficits or teenage parenting as children. As they studied the literature, Werner and Smith became curious to know more about the continuities and discontinuities that followed the journey from high-risk childhood resiliency to adulthood. They also wanted to know if the same protective factors that were used to buffer the children during times of duress would be utilized in some way as an adult during similar stressing experiences. Werner and Smith also explored the “turning point” experiences in adulthood that led individuals on the road to recovery. The basic premise of their study was to follow the various pathways that men and women from difficult childhoods took to live successful and happy lives. They discovered that resilient adults displayed personal competence and determination. These individuals often had a supportive spouse or mate and a faith in a higher power. Interestingly, a characteristic found in resilient adults was the necessity to detach themselves from friends and family whose emotional and domestic problems still threatened to overwhelm them. Ultimately, these men and women were able to live their lives without resentment and instead lived with compassion, optimism and hopefulness.

Protective factors that support resiliency

If resiliency is to be established, generally there is a process by which characteristics of resiliency can be nurtured. A resilient attitude must be adopted not only by people themselves, but also by homes, schools, and work environments. It involves verbal and nonverbal messages. It is the development of protective factors that reduces the impact of traumatic and challenging experiences on people. Higgens (1994) found that, although many of these factors are linked genetically, most of them could be learned and therefore pursued. The evidence of protective factors seems to be more crucial in the lives of people than are the specific stressful events (Werner & Smith, 1992). It is the goal, then, to build up enough protective factors that would thwart the effects of challenge, stress, or trauma (Henderson, 1997).

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified what is known as “the field of positive psychology.” Maslow (1954) first used the term in his book, *Motivation and personality*. In the book, he promoted the importance of stressing positive self-esteem among youth, peak experiences, and self-actualization. Seligman (1990) found that learned optimism helps people persevere through challenging times. According to his research, pessimists had a tendency to give up when faced with adversity. Therefore, an optimistic attitude opens the door to better outcomes to life’s problems. Proponents of the positive psychology approach suggested that the spectrum of the human experience should include an appreciation of individual strengths, talents and virtues (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006). The postmodern perspective advocates that practitioners adjust their focus from problem-oriented to the strengths that enable a person to rise above and grow despite experiencing adversity (Richardson, 2002).

Perhaps one of the most poignant examples comes from the experiences of the German psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, who was a concentration camp prisoner during the holocaust of World War II. In his book, *Man's search for meaning*, Frankl (1984) described the power of man's conscious choice of reaction in the face of adversity:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. (p. 50)

Wolin and Wolin (1993) cited seven skills, which they believed would merge into lasting strengths or aspects of survivor's characteristics: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humor, and morality. An in depth explanation of the seven skills will follow later in this literature review.

The crux of the approach developed by Wolin and Wolin (1993) is to help an individual reframe their painful experiences to reveal resilience (Thomsen, 2002). Their model follows a form that they called the Damage versus Challenge. The Damage model perceives people as damaged, with a need to be "fixed" while the Challenge model sees people as having damaging experiences, but who can use them in a way that makes them emotionally stronger. The aim of this model is to bring the individuals to acknowledge what is going right instead of what is going wrong.

The Minnesota Risk Research Project (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984) was the basis of the study to determine the informational processing dysfunction of children of schizophrenic parents. They discovered that these children grew to be warm, caring adults rather than maladaptive, as was often assumed they would become by society. Garmezy used

his confident criteria: effectiveness (work, play, and love), high expectancies, positive outlook, self-esteem, internal locus of control, self-discipline, good problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and humor. He also constructed a resiliency triad that included personality disposition, a supportive family environment, and an external support system.

Benard (1993) identified four personal attributes that seemed to encompass many of the traits recognized in other studies on resiliency. According to her study, resilient people often are found to have social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. These serve as the roots from which many other protective factors seem to stem.

In analyzing the data collected from following resilient individuals from childhood to adulthood, Werner and Smith (1992) found that certain protective factors stood as determinants between high risk individuals with and without coping problems. These discriminators in childhood were the educational level of the parents (especially the opposite-sex parent), the opportunity to relate to a caring adult other than family and the support of a teacher who functioned as a role model as well as helped the youth determine future paths of vocation. In early adulthood, additional protective factors included the emotional support of spouses, friends and other family, the power of faith and prayer, and opportunities that allowed the individual to grow in confidence and competence. What was probably most interesting about the results of this study was the fact that by the time high-risk youths with serious coping problems had reached their mid-thirties, they exhibited a recovery of sorts and seemed to “pull their lives together.”

Resiliency Education

Current research – K-12

Berliner and Benard (1995) strongly asserted that developing indicators of resiliency increases the possibility of personal and academic success of students. Project Resilience researchers proposed helping develop those indicators in students by fostering resiliency in the elementary classroom through interactions and opportunities within the daily instruction (Bickart & Wolin, 1997). Children were involved in assessing their work, constructing goals, developing standards, working collaboratively, practicing problem solving, making choices, and structuring community, setting, and classroom rules. These opportunities were based on the seven resiliency traits, identified by Wolin and Wolin (1993).

Pisapia (1994) provided educators with a format that allowed them to understand both at-risk and resilient students in a way that enabled the schools to design support and offer the type of climate in which the students could develop. Pisapia operationalized the resiliency model devised by McMillan and Reed (1993), so that schools could utilize it in their perspective settings. Pisapia subscribed to six traits that he believed described resilient students: self-efficacy, goals oriented, personal responsibility, optimism, internal expectations, and coping ability. Schools could implement the model and provide opportunities for teachers, staff, and parents to encourage building the six traits of resiliency. He believed students could be motivated to learn and change through encouragement and high expectations.

From prior research in the realm of education, six themes have emerged that form the construct showing families, communities, and schools how an environment can be formed to

foster attitudes of resiliency in children (Benard, 1993). These themes involved increasing bonding, setting clear and consistent boundaries, teaching life skills, providing care and support, setting and communicating high expectations, and providing opportunities for meaningful participation. When combined, these strategies produce an effect that builds components of resiliency such as positive outlook, attachment to school, and greater academic success (Benard, 2004).

It seems when perusing the literature that each author has devised a list of criteria that support the resilient characteristics in children and youth. Schools advocating the teaching of resilience to their students seek to find the most effective sets of criteria to which their students can learn from and adapt to their lives. In reviewing the compilation of effective protective factors offered by the various studies, it is fairly easy to see that there are underlying similarities in the lists and that most can be adapted in a specific or general format to the school setting. In a study by Sagor (1993), students at risk were found to be particularly helped through resilience-building experiences focusing on five themes: competency (feeling successful), belonging (feeling valued), usefulness (feeling needed), potency (feeling empowered), and optimism (feeling encouraged and hopeful). Schools and individual educators then have the option to incorporate these themes directly or vicariously into the curriculum. Pikes, Burrell, and Holiday (1998) developed a menu of cross-discipline strategies that incorporated the five themes into curricular components.

McGrath (2000) compiled research and identified two main directions on which to focus for schools wishing to implement resiliency-building programs. The environmental approach seeks to nurture the connections with family, school, religious involvement, cultures of cooperation, and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution. The

second approach deals with teaching personal protective skills as a central part of the curriculum. These competencies would include: success, mastery, social skills, optimistic thinking, self-knowledge, a sense of humor, problem solving and planning skills, positive self-perceptions and self-efficacy, goal setting and stress management (p. 2).

Most studies that promote resiliency programs in schools aim to incorporate them as a concept within the curriculum of the regular disciplines. However, at the post-secondary level, the maturity to absorb and incorporate direct learning of resiliency skills and characteristics would seem more viable.

Post-secondary institution research

The debate among helping professionals over whether these characteristics or traits can be learned has been clarified by resiliency theory (Richardson, 2002). According to Wolin and Wolin (1993), one becomes resilient by learning about resilience. They suggest that one should, “go out in search of your resilience” (p. 7). As Higgins (1994) pointed out, resiliency can be learned, therefore, we have an obligation to nurture the skills in people that make adaptive and positive responses to life’s travesties possible.

However, there is limited research addressing resiliency in students at the post-secondary level. As Richardson (2002) stated, “an article elucidating the nature and applications of resilience and resiliency theory is overdue” (p. 308). Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein (2006) echoed Richardson by reiterating that most research has been conducted on populations younger than the college level student; thus we have little research-based concept of resiliency in adulthood.

Components for students

Protective factors inventory. According to Benard (1993), resilient children usually have the following four attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (p. 44)

1. The qualities exemplifying *social competence* include: responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor. These people have the ability to develop relationships with family and friends both in the school and in the community.
2. One with *problem solving skills* demonstrates the ability to think abstractly and reflectively as well as seeing alternate solutions to problems both cognitive and social. These skills are augmented with an ability to plan, think creatively and utilize resources.
3. Having a sense of identity is indicative of a person's *autonomy*. This person is able to think and act independently and seeks a sense of control over his/her environment. Often one finds people with autonomy as those able to separate themselves from dysfunctional family environments.
4. A *sense of purpose* is often seen in one who has goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future.

Benard (1993) went on to express the thought that “blaming the victim” or trying to “fix the kid” are often the temptation, but never the answer. The most productive way to foster resiliency is to provide an atmosphere of care and support, positive expectations, and ongoing opportunity for participation. These are all elements that are possible to include in a

school setting of any age. Werner and Smith (1992) found that frequently the most positive role model outside of one's family has been a teacher. Research is full of examples that show the impact that a caring and compassionate teacher can have in the lives of students. Benard (1993) noted that resilient youths take the opportunity to find love, social support and caring from those around them.

In her research, Benard (1993) discovered that schools that maintain high expectations and provide the necessary support have extremely high academic success among their students. She found that when teachers communicate the importance of the work, a sense of belief in the students, a promise to stand by them through the process, and who play to the strengths of the students, demonstrate a great motivating influence on them (p. 46). Holding students responsible for their learning fosters an intrinsic motivation. Kohl (1994) stated that, when a student is labeled "at-risk," it in a sense defines the child as pathological based on what she or he might do instead of what they have done. Research continues to show that 50-80 % of students with a variety of "risk factors" in their lives eventually do succeed, especially if they have experienced a caring school environment with high expectations (p. 47).

The research continued to highlight the impact educators can make on their students in terms of resiliency. However, Benard (1993) made an interesting point on behalf of the educators involved in building these characteristics in their students (p. 48).

Fostering resiliency in young people is ultimately an "inside-out" process that depends on educators taking care of themselves. To see the strengths in children, we must see our own strengths; to look beyond their risks and see their resiliency means acknowledging our own inner resiliency.

The protective factors ascribed to by various researchers possess similarities when studied. However, in order to build a deep understanding of resiliency, it is necessary to examine several individually as has been done in this review. McMillan and Reed (1994) produced a protective factor inventory that included: individual attributes, positive use of time, family, school (p. 137).

Having a pleasing temperament that elicits a positive response from others is an attribute of a resilient individual according to the McMillan and Reed (1994) study. These individuals have high intrinsic motivation and internal locus of control that allows them to pursue interests and academic success. They are self-starters and hold themselves responsible for their achievements. Self-efficacy, clear realistic goals, and an attitude of optimism towards the future are important to those who have these characteristics of resiliency (p. 138).

Using time in a positive way is another indicator of resilient people (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Meaningful time spent on hobbies, interests, activities and participation in community affairs helps to promote growth and self-esteem. It seems that resilient individuals find that a sense of service, an altruistic nature, lends a feeling of purpose.

The study goes on to examine how family relationships affect resiliency. McMillan and Reed (1994) found that those who had at least one close bond with a caregiver who gave them emotional support and attention fared much better than those who did not have a caregiver role model. Parents were not always the ones found in the role of caregiver. Oftentimes it was an extended family member that became the positive role model. These relationships helped convey to the individual that life makes sense and they have some control over it (p. 140).

Although most of the literature written on resiliency in the school setting is aimed at the K-12 student population, there is enough generality of concept that could be adapted to the post-secondary level of education. McMillan and Reed (1994) found that most resilient youth had a positive feeling toward their school experience. They participated in class discussions, completed assignments and were involved in extra-curricular events. Werner and Smith (1982) stated that involvement in school activities increases a sense of belonging and self-esteem by creating a bond and working cooperatively with other people.

Teachers play an integral part in the resiliency of students. Resilient at-risk students in studies by Geary (1988) indicated that their ability to succeed was directly related to teachers or staff who took a personal interest in them. They described these teachers as possessing qualities such as: being caring, having respect for them as persons and as learners, being able to get along with them, listening without being intrusive, taking them seriously, being available and understanding, helping and providing encouragement, and laughing with them. These students also depended on the professionalism of these teachers. They cited that they looked to them to: listen to the motivations behind inappropriate behavior before disciplining, listen without judging, being fair in grading and instruction, praising and encouraging them when they succeed, holding high expectations, and being willing to know the students personally as well as academically (Werner & Smith, 1982). It is paramount to spend time knowing the qualities of people that can profoundly impact the resiliency of students. Research continues to indicate how important the role of teacher is in providing the foundation that can lead to the success of their students' lives. McMillan and Reed (1994) issued a challenge to schools to continue striving to foster the relationships and involvement that enhance the resilient development of students.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) studied the effects of hardships on the lives of youth. They found that resiliency is a process of struggling against the hardships. During this process one can accumulate small successes that build into perseverance, confidence, and the ability to walk side by side through failures, set backs and disappointments. During their research, they defined what they called, “survivor’s pride” as the feeling of accomplishment that results from having the determination to persist in the face of hardship or adversity. It is the same definition they use for resiliency. This definition formed the basis for their research as they studied men and women who had endured hardships but overcame them to lead fulfilling lives.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) identified seven skills that develop into strengths within a survivor. They called these resiliencies:

Insight – the habit of asking tough questions and giving honest answers.

Independence – drawing boundaries between oneself and troubled parents or other sources of trouble in one’s life.

Relationships – fulfilling connections to others.

Initiative – taking charge of problems in one’s life, assertiveness.

Creativity – using creativity to express one’s self.

Humor – finding the comic in the tragic.

Morality – making decisions and acting on an informed conscience. (p. 5)

Wolin and Wolin (1993) intended that the seven resiliencies be considered as tools to be used by teachers, clinicians and prevention workers as a guide to nurturing resilience in their work with students. In developing the Challenge Model, they desired that teachers would utilize it to help students realize that troubles can be seen as dangers and also as opportunities. Often the mindset of helping professionals has been to dwell on the negative, seek to diagnose, label and “fix-it.” The Challenge Model gives students validation and encouragement to use their own power to help themselves. Teachers using the Challenge

model practice techniques such as talking to the students about their strengths, and encouraging and motivating youth to take self-responsibility. This mindset encourages teachers as well to be hopeful and hold high expectations for the students they serve.

These examples of research are all important components of resiliency education in post-secondary because they can be adapted to an intentional curriculum and interactive instructional setting at a college.

Skills-development model. Research on student development at the post-secondary level has shown the strong impact that peer groups have on the ability of a student to make changes (Antonio, 2004). Campuses are often demographically divided and fragmented with few formal structures with which to connect and make meaning of their varied experiences. College students would benefit from educational planning that would help them to transfer the variety of inputs into “meaningful thought and action” (Brown, 2004, p. 134). Because of the changing nature of the college demographics, and racial diversity, it would be prudent to invest in research regarding these concerns.

The resiliency research has overwhelmingly revealed how significant the ability to form healthy relationships is on responding to adversity. Fredrickson (2002) discusses the connection of positive emotion and the capacity for interpersonal closeness, healthy attitudes toward life and social activity, and building psychological resources. These characteristics seem to be conducive for formulating friendships and alliances.

Relationship building skills can be taught. Although it seems some people tend to naturally and easily make new and lasting friendships, others need to be taught basic concepts that can ease their way into strengthening their interpersonal skills.

The Values in Action project out of the University of Pennsylvania developed a manual to diagnose personal strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The manual lists categories of strength classifications. The fifth category highlights relational and nurturing strengths. An individual with these strengths is able to form meaningful relationships, communicate effectively and nurture others. According to Smith (2006), strengths can be taught. Therefore, it is possible, through education, that a student could become adept at social and relational skills.

Many challenges and stresses, even that of everyday living, must be continually faced in our society today (Frydenberg, 2004). Developing coping strategies has become a topic of interest by some researchers. Frydenberg resolved that effective coping strategies can turn a conflict into a problem that can be dealt with and conversely a lack of coping strategies can have a negative affect on solving a conflict.

Coping has been defined as the effort it takes to deal with stress (Frydenberg, 2004). The personal characteristics a person brings to the situation include biological, dispositional, personal and family. Perceiving the problem and coping successfully will be impacted by all these factors. Important to the process are attitude and beliefs of the individual in regard to his/her own capacity to cope with a difficult situation.

The goal of learning to cope with problems and challenges is to develop resiliency (Frydenberg, 2004). It is not that one should avoid stress or conflict; it is that one should be equipped with the coping skills to encounter stress and therefore build self-confidence and competence (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, & Gillham, 1995). A person can raise self-awareness by examining past conflicts and his or her response. This is the beginning of developing and refining coping skills.

Closely related to building coping skills is the art of conflict resolution. Problem solving strategies are life skills that are important in almost every aspect of living. Healthy conflict resolution aims at a win-win situation. Most conflict resolution training programs focus on instilling attitudes, knowledge and skill that lead to cooperative problem-solving and hindering the win-lose mindset (Coleman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2004).

The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), founded in 1986 by Professor Emeritus Morton Deutsch sets as its mission to educate and help individuals, schools, communities, businesses, and governments to increase understanding and awareness of the nature of conflict and to develop the skills necessary to resolve conflict equitably and constructively (Coleman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2004, p. 32-33). Some of the basic concepts adherent to ICCCR's theoretical approach included:

- Conflict is a natural occurring phenomenon and has both constructive and destructive potential, depending upon how it is managed.
- A constructive process of conflict resolution is similar to an effective, cooperative problem-solving process, while a destructive process is similar to a win-lose competitive struggle.

Conflict resolution and problem solving strategies can be taught in an educational setting according to researchers. Wolin and Wolin (1993) suggested that managing crisis involves learning to: define the difficulty; accept that problems are a normal part of life and not a stigma, punishment, or sign of weakness; seek to find a solution (which involves brainstorming), trying out the selected solution, and evaluating. Practice and more practice create the habit. It is necessary for students to have continual experiences of conflict, because

it is in this manner that they learn to adapt to life's adverse situations (Coleman & Fisher-Yoshida, 2004).

A study by Penely, Tomaka, and Wiebe (2002) attributed active problem solving, epitomized by task-oriented coping, as indicative of positive recovery to stressful situations. Being able to respond to adversity with a sense of coping, and assertive problem solving seems to promote resiliency.

Autonomy is the hallmark of the ability to make one's own decisions. A study by Fredrickson (2001) revealed that more flexible thinking and more behavioral options may increase the resources a person has at his or her disposal during times of crisis or adversity. The flexibility in thinking is derived from decision-making skills.

Educators versed in the categories of Bloom's Taxonomy will be able to provide questioning experiences that expand the thought processes and encourage the development of higher level critical thinking skills, an asset to decision making (Whittington, 2000). The higher-level thinking skills include application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These are categories that enhance decision-making competencies in students.

Literature-based model. Through literature, students are able to view problem solving from the vantage point of the observer. They are able to "try on" solutions to situations before taking the process into the real world. Students can observe how others have dealt with problems they have encountered, such as, sadness, stress, fear and uncertainty. From the angle of the third person, they have a chance to use conflict resolution or problem solving skills to find solutions or deal with the problems.

Through the use of literature, students not only learn to cope with different issues, they also find they are not alone in encountering certain kinds of problems. Using existing literature is one way to build resiliency in students. Additionally, Jalongo (2007) contended that when literature is used in the classroom to teach resiliency strategies, class discussion could enhance understanding as well as increase internal and intrinsic motivation to change.

Another way is to assist students in learning to tell their own story as a way of reframing adverse situations in their lives. According to Smith (2006), “telling one’s life story, making sense of one’s life, and viewing oneself as a survivor (rather than a victim of bad parents, poor family, etc.) has a powerful effect....” (p. 39).

White and Epston (1990) found that when people had the opportunity to retell their stories, they could accentuate their courage rather than their helplessness. By writing or verbalizing the story, the individual has an opportunity to see the negative situation from a distance, initially, and through time, they are able to reframe it using skills of resiliency to observe how they emerge as a stronger person.

Strength-based model. The most important thing about the strength-based model, according to Wolin and Wolin (1993), is the belief that there exists within youth, who are in trouble, the strength to act and overcome their adversities. The former president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Martin Seligman (1998), stated: “Psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best within a person (p. 1).”

Seligman (1990) noted that pessimists react to adverse experiences with a sense of helplessness while optimists persevere with hopefulness. He found this optimistic thinking

increased resiliency in people and improved the chances of successful outcomes. Resiliency education focusing on positive strengths seeks to build up positive thinking about the future. As individuals, a positive outlook enhances the capacity for love, courage, perseverance, forgiveness, and wisdom. As a group, the emphasis is on responsibility and altruism (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Dreikurs (1964) maintained that dwelling on mistakes “saps one’s courage” (p. 56).

Strength, like resiliency, is often defined as the ability to cope with life. It includes concentrating on the essence of what makes life fulfilling to an individual or others around. As with resiliency, strengths are not fixed traits, but rather something that develops over time (Smith, 2006).

There are a multitude of categories that involve the identification of particular strengths that affect certain aspects of life. Through their Values in Action project at the University of Pennsylvania, Peterson and Seligman (2004) listed the following classifications: strengths of wisdom and knowledge, strengths of courage, strengths of humanity and love, strengths of justice, strengths of temperance, and strengths of transcendence. What makes this study even more paramount is the desire to find human strengths that cut across cultures.

Most cultures have valued wisdom and spiritual strength. It could be said that this is one of the *first* universally recognized human strengths (Baltes & Staudinger, 1998; Sternberg, 1998). A *second* category includes those that are considered emotional strengths, such as insight, optimism, perseverance, putting troubles in perspective, finding purpose in life, having the ability to endure, hope, faith and love of life. Goleman (1995) determined that our emotional strengths are often more important than our intellect. The *third* category is

known as character strengths consisting of behaviors of integrity, honesty, discipline, courage, and perseverance. Creative strengths comprise the *fourth* category. The *fifth* category builds around relational and nurturing strength. Educational strengths highlight the *sixth* category. Analytical and cognitive strengths compose the *seventh* category as they endorse a person's ability to think and reason. The *eighth* category includes strengths that refer to the ability to secure employment and provide for self and family. The *ninth* category encompasses the individual's ability to utilize social and community support. The *tenth* and final category in the list of universal traits of strength revolves around survival skills.

The classifications and categorization of strengths described in the previous paragraphs parallel much of the research, classification and categorization of the characteristics defining resilient individuals (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Moreover, the strength-based theory is grounded in prevention research literature training people to become resilient (Smith, 2006). According to Smith, when a person recognizes their own resiliency, they build a pathway to their own authentic self-esteem. This kind of self-esteem is constructed around their ability to recognize their own accomplishments and identify how they have been able to use their particular strengths. Smith insisted that resiliency is not a fixed state. It revolves and moves according to the contextual process that develops as individuals interact with their environment. When given the opportunities to develop their strengths in positive ways, youth seem to have different life experiences than those who are not granted such opportunities.

Frankl's (1984) work in logotherapy paved the way for the strength-based approach by emphasizing one's search for meaning out of adversity. His approach encouraged individuals to focus on the future and meanings of life to be fulfilled rather than the negative aspects of current or past life experiences. Likewise, the strength perspective focuses on

helping people make meaning out of potentially damaging situations in life (Smith, 2006).

Again, Smith emphasized “strengths can be taught” (p. 34).

Smith (2006) outlined 12 propositions that addressed the strength-based approach in counseling. With some adaptations, these basic propositions could be used in an educational setting. Proposition Eight identifies encouragement as a key basis to effect behavioral change. Smith called it “the fulcrum for change” (p. 36). Validating the individual by honoring the efforts and struggles to deal with life’s challenges is the premise of Proposition Nine. Hope is the essence of Proposition 10. When contemplated in reference to resiliency education these three propositions provide an example of the complimentary aspects of strength-based and resiliency-based education.

By designing an educational format that focuses on strengths and skills of resiliency, the educator seeks to discover what people can do rather than what they cannot do. The concept of this educational direction places the emphasis and attention on how individuals have been successful in dealing with adversity rather than how they have failed.

It is worthy to mention that resiliency and strength-based education should not focus solely on positives while ignoring the negative concerns or even prevaricating strengths that do not exist. Norman (2000), encouraged practitioners to use the strength-based approach to encourage students to recognize their strengths, build on them, and consequently enhancing their competencies. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) contended that, in this way, the students learn they have intrinsic and extrinsic resources that allow them to learn new skills and solve problems.

Encouragement is a vital component of resiliency education. According to Dreikurs (1964), encouragement is an ongoing process with the intent to instill a sense of self-respect

and accomplishment. With healthy encouragement, a student can find courage to make a mistake and fail without damage to his or her self-esteem. With encouragement and awareness through education, a student can grow and test their ability to cope with misfortunes in life.

Henderson and Milstein (1996) advocated that resiliency research:

.... offers hope based on scientific evidence that many, if not most of those who experience stress, trauma, and “risks” in their lives can bounce back. It challenges educators to focus more on *strengths instead of deficits*, to look through a lens of strength in analyzing individual behaviors, and confirms the power of those strengths as a lifeline to resiliency. Most important, it indicates what must be in place in institutions, especially schools, for resiliency to flourish in the lives of students and adults who learn and work there. (p. 3)

Barriers to student success in the first year of college

Thomsen (2002) described schools as the safest, most orderly, and predictable places in a student’s life. However, schools have the potential to create hope in one’s future or destroy it. As educators, we have been given the opportunity to help students grow in the skills they will need to overcome the challenging and sometimes devastating events of their life. To do this, requires intentionality in program, process, and the nurturing of characteristics that make one resilient in the face of life’s challenges.

The lack of resiliency often presents itself in a variety of characteristics. One would assume that the lack of resiliency would be seen in dramatic and destructive behaviors such as suicide and severe mental illness. In many cases, that can be true, however the lack of resiliency is more often less dramatic and demonstrated by burnout, fatigue, malaise, depression, defensiveness, and cynicism (Wakefield & Pulley, 2001). The increase in non-

resilient attitudes, such as these, seen among some college students (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kitzrow, 2003) could be attributed to several factors.

A major barrier to student success during the first years of college ironically is the attitude of their parents who send them. In order to better understand resiliency among post-secondary students, it is necessary to learn and understand what factors are a part of their reality. Among the variables affecting the resiliency of post-secondary students are the affluence of American society, the tendency for parents to “hover” over their college-age children, becoming too involved with their decisions and issues, and a sense of “entitlement” into which youth today seem to have grown (Lasch, 1979; Rosen, 2005; White, 2005). Because of this intense “hovering” over every aspect of their children’s lives, these parents have been dubbed “helicopter parents” (Shih & Allen, 2007, p. 90). Personal communication technologies, such as instant messaging and cell phones, enable parents to closely track activities, and involvement with their children’s academic, sports, and leisure activities. This generation of parents, expect the needs of their children to be promptly attended to (by college personnel) and do not hesitate becoming vocally and physically involved (Meunier & Wolf, 2006). Karen Forbes (2001) noted, “Colleagues in other departments tell stories about parents demanding single rooms, grade changes, increased financial aid, and forgiveness of policy violations as if they were haggling over the price of a car or a house” (p. 12). With the costs of college rising and increasing attitudes of consumerism, parents are demanding more customer service treatment from institutions of higher learning.

Final Thoughts

As William Shakespeare proposed, are there “sweet uses of adversity?” Perhaps there are. As the research has alluded, the chosen response to what has happened in the wake of one’s experiences will determine if adversity is worn “as a precious jewel on our head” or, if one remains like the toad, “ugly and venomous.” The choice is with the beholder. Nevertheless, just as Shakespeare used his pen to incite the listener to rise to the choice and look to the “sweet uses of adversity,” we, as educators, can use our voice in the educational institution to motivate the learners to choose the response that will allow them to don the “precious jewel.”

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the ordinary” (as cited in Baldwin, 2005, p. 23). Looking for something deeper in the simple experiences of life, not only gives meaning, but purpose for our existence. We research in order to uncover meanings and purpose, but we do it with intention.

Students at the post-secondary level face new challenges daily. After leaving the parental home to live on their own for the first time, these new challenges seem anything but ordinary. There is little doubt in the field of higher education that we have entered a new era involving parents of undergraduates and their active participation in their student’s college experiences (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). Today’s environment plays host to parents who expect involvement in their student’s college experience. Students and their parents now come to institutions of higher education with a sense of entitlement, nurtured by a society of consumerism with businesses guaranteeing 100% satisfaction with operators standing by 24-hours a day to heed the buyers’ beck and call (p. 8).

In light of the various factors affecting transition and adjustment of the freshman students to the college experience, it seemed prudent that we explore how these young adults make meaning of resiliency, the ability to deal effectively with challenges, in their lives. This chapter describes the methodological framework that was used to conduct this phenomenological study. I begin with the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

Epistemology

Exploring epistemology gives researchers an opportunity to wander in the charted areas of the philosophical underpinnings of how we know what we know. To understand the nature and possibilities of knowledge we must grapple with what we know, how we know it and if it is legitimate. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), epistemology refers to the assumptions one makes about the process of gathering knowledge. Constructionism, which informed this study, is an epistemological lens which views knowledge and “all meaningful reality as such, as contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). Meaning is constructed in relationship to something, it is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 2003).

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical framework that supported the methodology for this study was found in the interpretivist philosophy. The ontology of the constructionist-interpretivist is that there are multiple valid and socially constructed realities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1948, trans. 2004) referred to the “world of perception” (p. 10) which, in essence, is the world as we perceive it. Since we perceive with our body, the subject of perception, Merleau-Ponty claimed that our perceptual experience can be deduced with a reasoning or knowledge structure:

It is our “bodily” intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience,

are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations. (p. 10)

Therefore, the multiple realities of the lived experience can be interpreted for meaning through the lens of perception.

Merleau-Ponty (1948, trans. 2004) demonstrated the precariousness of interpretation through our limitations and perceptual experience with this parable:

There is a Japanese engraving that shows an Elephant surrounded by blind men. They have been sent as a delegation to identify this monumental intrusion into our human affairs. The first of them has put his arms round one of the feet and declares, "It's a tree." "True," says the second, who has found the ears, "and here are the leaves." "Absolutely not," says the third, who is running his hand down the animal's side, "it's a wall." The fourth, who has grabbed hold of the tail, cries, "It's a piece of string." "It's a pipe," retorts the fifth, who has hold of the trunk. (pp. 76-77)

We can only construct meaning to what we perceive in the present, our current reality, with the knowledge we have embodied and gathered in the past.

The curriculum for the resiliency development component was designed with the intent to introduce the protective factors of resiliency to the students. However, as literature has reinforced, the protective factors can be found in varying degrees in most people. Through the teaching process, the intent was to help students identify and enhance their existing protective factors as well as learn how to bring new strengths into being. For this to become a reality, it was necessary for the students to take the new knowledge and combine it with what they knew of themselves as they began the process of constructing new meaning in terms of resiliency.

Scaffolded learning refers to teaching and learning that give an inceptive framework from which the learner can structure a support for understanding (Crotty, 2003). In medicine procedures are often performed using sutures and tissue that function as the emerging bridge

to bring connections together, just as scaffolded learning unites ideas and concepts. As Merleau-Ponty (1948, trans. 2004) and Crotty (2003) suggested, bridging the philosophy behind what we know and how we came to know it is the stance of interpretivism which looks to interpret the world by examining the historical and cultural meanings in the social world.

The students in this study were exposed to teaching and learning that is new in many respects and, yet, contains reminiscence of prior understanding. The intent of the new teachings was to bridge or scaffold with what had been culturally or intentionally learned before in order to create a new link of understanding and learning.

Methodology

The methodological approach of phenomenology was appropriate for this study as I, the researcher, discerned the “essence” of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003). Phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of our theoretical activities not only in describing the essences, but also through grasping roots in the ordinary lived experience (Matthews, 2002). The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty (as cited by Matthews, 2002), believed that the phenomenological philosophy is essentially the description of the “perception” of the perceived world (p. 46). Merleau-Ponty believed that describing the perception was primary for phenomenology. By looking at our ordinary engagement with the world from a bit of distance, we gain clearer insight and understanding, just as we might by holding a book a little way from our eyes in order to read better (Matthews, 2002, p. 35). As the students described their experience with RDE, the very act of

putting their perceptions into language simulated the “stepping back” in order to elucidate the essence of the experience (Matthews, 2002).

Methods

Esterberg (2002) believed we analyze the data in order to answer the questions: “So what? Why is the research interesting or important? Why should people care about it? And finally, What is the larger sociological significance of the study?” (p. 79). The answers to the questions presented by Esterberg require thoughtful reflection. Understanding resiliency involves verbal and nonverbal messages. It is the [process] development of protective factors that reduces the impact of challenging experiences on people (Henderson, 1997). Therefore, to gather the optimal information in order to formulate the interpretive analysis, the data were collected using focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis.

Epoche

The phenomenological approach to the process known as *epoche*, is that of bracketing, or setting aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories concerning the present study in order to eliminate as much bias as possible (Moustakas, 1995). This enables the researcher to come to the data with an open mind. It allows the listener to hear what might, otherwise have been muted by the din of pervasive beliefs and opinions belonging to the researcher.

Moustakas (1995) suggested employing the discipline of self-dialogues prior to the interview session. The self-dialogue becomes a time to set aside prejudgments, thoughts, and feelings that otherwise might intrude on what is expressed by the participants and color what is heard by the researcher with a predisposed interpretation.

Bracketing involves intentionally placing within brackets any thoughts, feelings, or prior experiences of the researcher that has the potential to interfere with truly hearing and understanding what is said by the participants. Throughout the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data for this study, I diligently reflected regularly through journaling and personal contemplation my preconceptions and biases in connection to my experience with resiliency.

Having studied resiliency for nearly a decade, it had become such a part of the fabric of my understanding, that there may have been assumptions I had grown to accept without question or thought. It was imperative that I be reflexive about what I knew, how I knew it, and how it lived out in my understanding. I pledged to be assiduous in addressing these assumptions and biases by writing them in a reflection journal prior to the collection of data and throughout the analysis process. Then I disciplined myself to set aside those assumptions and biases in order to hear and accept new thoughts, interpretations, and encounters with resiliency development of the students as they relate their experiences to me.

Research site

The site of this study was at a Midwestern land-grant university. The site was chosen for the convenience of the researcher as well as the quality of the opportunity in which to conduct the research. This one hundred and fifty year old university is comprised of seven colleges offering over 100 undergraduate degrees and approximately 200 additional fields of study to those seeking graduate and professional degrees. The aesthetic campus is situated on 2000 acres with over 160 buildings. The study was limited to students currently enrolled in the university.

Participants

The participants for this study were purposefully selected in order to elicit the most valuable data necessary for analysis (Creswell, 2003). A class of 47 freshmen students, within this public university, within a freshman orientation seminar, participated in four sessions of RDE. Prior to the start of the class, I had determined to purposefully select a moderate number of students from the class and ask them to participate in the study. The criteria used to purposely select the students were determined from the responses received in the written documents submitted as a part of the class assignments. At the conclusion of the fourth session, an email was sent to 20 students, so identified, describing the study and requesting their participation. Eleven students responded and became the participants of the study.

An application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted and approved for the study (see Appendix). At the beginning of the focus group session, the procedure for the data collection was explained and students had opportunity to ask questions and share any concerns. When everyone had understood the purpose, process, and roles of each student and me as the researcher, a consent form was distributed for each student to sign according to the stipulations set forth by the IRB.

Data collection

There are multiple layers of analysis required in qualitative research. It is judicious to be aware of the fact that the individuals or group are not the only voices or units of data analysis and interpretation. The voices, experiences, culture, and politics in the history of the narrator affect the content as well as the context of the data (Fine, 2007). The process of

collecting the narrative cannot necessarily give voice, but we can hear the voice and then record and interpret (Riessman, 1993, p. 8).

In order to gather rich and meaningful data, the goal of a phenomenological study, one of the principal methods is the interview (Merriam, 2002), which is the “heart of social research” according to Esterberg (2002, p. 83). The most effective interviews are usually in-depth, semi-structured, and guided with open-ended questions. Since this type of interview is not pre-scripted, the data are described in the words of the participants, providing authentic insight and perspective (Esterberg, 2002). Sessions, for both the focus group and the individual interviews, were approximately 45 minutes in length. Each session was audio taped and transcribed.

Part of the assignments for the class included addressing topics on resiliency in a journal entry every week. Worksheets, exploring components and concepts of resiliency, were a part of the assignments and added to the data collection. The journals and written assignments were analyzed for additional insights into the experiences of the student.

Analysis

The process of analyzing and interpreting the data used the phenomenological method endorsed by Colaizzi (1978). The procedural steps included: becoming familiar with all the data, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing the aggregate formulated meanings into clusters or themes, creating an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and trimming the description to the rudimentary structure of the phenomenon.

The first step in the process of analysis was to become familiar with all the data. This included complete transcripts of the interviews as well as any printed or written documents

such as the journals and written assignments. The participant's description of the phenomenon provided an insight into his/her understanding and perception and the start of making sense of the data. This is what Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Matthews, 2002) referred to as understanding the essence.

The second step, referred to as extracting significant statements, required a return to each of the transcripts and documents. The task was to identify phrases or sentences that directly related to the phenomenon. This was an opportunity to eliminate any repetitions of statements made by various participants. At the completion of this step, I had a list of significant statements to use in order to begin the process of interpreting the meaning.

The third step, called formulating meanings, which involved elucidating the meaning of each significant statement. This step was dependent on the intuition or creative insight of the researcher to illuminate the meaning of the participant's words. Interpreting the essence of something, as described by Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Matthews, 2002) is paramount to effective analysis. This step is precarious and the meaning should never "sever all connection with the original protocols; ...formulations must discover and illuminate those meanings hidden in the various contexts and horizons of the investigated phenomenon" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59).

During the fourth step, the aggregate formulated meanings were grouped into clusters representing common themes. Again, it was crucial that I rely on creative insight and an understanding of the essence of what was said in order to enable the emergence of the themes common to the transcripts and other documents. Accurately representing the participants meaning through the chosen themes was a challenge. In reviewing the clusters of themes, if

there was any sense of inconsistency, it was necessary to return and peruse the original documents for more congruent insight.

The final step in Colaizzi's (1978) model was to recruit the participant's feedback, known as member checking (Merriam, 2002) for validation on the interpretation of the findings. If the interpretation was accurate, the participant should be able to identify his/her particular experiences as articulated by the researcher. This step also gave opportunity for the participant to aid in fine-tuning and adding additional perspectives, which then could be included in the final product (Colaizzi, 1978).

Trustworthiness and Goodness

Research requires an element of understanding that what has been written about a subject can be considered valid. In qualitative research, validity is not interpreted in the same way that it is in quantitative studies (Creswell, 2003). Rather, it is the determination that the interpretation is accurate in the eyes of the researcher, the participants, and the readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Eisenhart (2006) claimed that, most often, researchers will produce a summary type version of the descriptions described in the transcripts and field notes. Decisions are made to determine which of the events are to be "encapsulated and sequenced to form narratives" (p. 569). It is not uncommon to see a plethora of quotes and direct dialogue from the interviews in the written narrative of some researchers. Eisenhart (2006) stated that this strategy is beneficial by the fact that it is able to represent the voice of the narrator directly, but it is an involved process and requires vigilant selecting, editing, and interpreting. I was intrigued by Eisenhart's statement that claims "interpretive commentary is the 'glue' added by the researcher; it provides his or her rationale for asserting that there are

certain relationships among the concepts as defined by the examples” (p. 571). By the mere act of writing, the researcher has an opportunity to admit of having actually “being there” at the place or the scene where the phenomenon took place. Eisenhart affirmed that this is an important element in the concept of trustworthiness.

The validity for this study was enhanced by incorporating several strategies described by Merriam (2002). The strategies applied in this research were: triangulation (using multiple investigators, theories, data sources or methods to confirm findings), member checks (asking participants to comment on my interpretation of the data), peer review (drawing upon the expertise of colleagues to review the interpretations) and reflexivity (the process of reflecting critically upon my position as researcher).

“Thick description” is often referred to as the “linchpin of qualitative writing” (Ponterotto, 2007, p. 415). Denzin (1989) considered thick description as a lead-in to “thick interpretation”, which then brings the reader to “thick meaning.” Thick description is more than the recording of the narrative. It includes the fruits of delving deep below the surface of the superficial, unearthing feelings, details, added context, and a network of social connections and relationships within the realm of experience and history.

Limitations

Limitations are inherent to the type of methodology used. The students participating in the data collection did so at the end of the first semester of their college experience and soon after returning from an extended holiday break to begin the second semester. Because of the emotional state during that time, there was a potential that their perceptions could be skewed.

As the researcher and author of the resiliency development curriculum, I was a part of the educational experience of the students in the study. It was necessary for me to be disciplined in the epoche process of bracketing my suppositions and biases incurred during the researching, writing, and teaching process of this study.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to one mid-sized, four-year, public, Midwestern college. Nevertheless, the study could provide useful information to other educational institutions or facilities of rehabilitation of any size or location that has an interest in the concept of resiliency.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of post-secondary students who participated in RDE. Qualitative inquiry approaches access to knowledge in a subjective manner. Employing strategies such as interviews, observation, and document analysis that are humanistic and interactive, the researcher gains rapport with the participants, (Creswell, 2003) and elucidates a unique and insightful perspective to the acquisition knowledge.

The conceptual framework of this study took into consideration that the prior research was reliable and also transferable. The theoretical concepts of the authors of resiliency research form a conceptual framework supporting the results determined from the focus groups, individual interviews, and documental analysis. The methodological approach to this study has its bedrock in the foundation of phenomenology, the discovery of meaning through experience with resiliency development.

Transition

The following chapters include three articles submitted to scholarly journals for publication. This is in accordance with the alternate dissertation format. Each journal article addresses a specific theme identified through the data, and recognized as key in understanding and applying resiliency in the lives of the participants. The first article addresses the meaning post-secondary students derived from the exposure to stories as a medium of instruction in RDE. The second article addresses the impact that learning in community had on the development of resiliency in the participants. The third article focuses on the transformative development that occurred within the participants as they made personal meaning of the concept of resiliency through application in their everyday lives. The final chapter is a summary of the dissertation, which includes implications and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 4. MY LIFE IN A BAG AND OTHER STORIES: ON THE ROAD TO RESILIENCY

by Kristine M. Meyer

A paper accepted for publication in the *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*

*“With weeping and with laughter,
Still is the story told,
How well Horatius kept the bridge
In the brave days of old.*

(Lord Macaulay, Lays of Ancient Rome, Horatius LXX)

Abstract

Students leaving home for college face new challenges and adversities as they experience newfound independence. Their ability to be resilient or to bounce back from various challenges determines their successes as students and eventually throughout life. This article examines the findings from a phenomenological study of eleven students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) during their first semester. The data confirmed that an awareness of the protective factors of resiliency, when taught through the pedagogy of storytelling, enabled the students to examine their life stories, making personal meaning while enhancing choices and behaviors characteristic of resilient individuals.

Introduction

The heart of the human experience is often captured in story. How students use the stories of their life experiences to understand themselves and their personal way of dealing with difficult issues can often affect how they respond to challenges and adversity. Using these personal stories along with metaphors and folklore to help students explore the notion

of resiliency may help them more effectively address the challenges and adversities they will likely encounter.

Each fall college campuses experience the influx of students ready to embrace college life. However, many of these students are leaving their parental homes for the first time, often unequipped mentally and emotionally to deal independently with the challenges and adverse situations they may face at college. During this vulnerable time, they may find the difficulties of student life, expectations of academic rigor, and the insecurities of being away from their parents too much with which to cope and, ultimately, negatively influencing their academic success. In other words, the students who display resilient behaviors possess the ability to “bounce back” from challenges or adversity seem able to cope with the stressors inevitable to college students (Benard 1993, p. 44). Therefore, exposing post-secondary students to RDE may be an effective measure in which to positively affect students’ experiences.

Research has provided sound evidence that resiliency can be taught (Werner & Smith, 1982; Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Characteristics that are significant of resiliency have often been labeled as “protective factors” (Benard, 1993). In her study, Benard (1993, 2004) identified four personal protective factors that could be found in varying degrees in people who seem resilient in the face of major life challenges. These protective factors are: social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose.

The protective factors found in resilient people are presented in a variety of ways. For example, those with social competence often possess the qualities that exude responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor. Socially competent

people are able to develop relationships with family and friends in a variety of settings. People displaying skills in problem solving seem more able to think abstractly and reflectively while identifying possible solutions to problems – both cognitively and socially. Planning, creativity, and resourcefulness come easily to a problem-solver. Autonomous people have a strong sense of identity. They are independent in thought and action; they enjoy a sense of control over their environment, and are often able to separate themselves from dysfunctional family circumstances. Finally, those with a sense of purpose have goals, aspirations, hopefulness, perseverance, and a sense of a bright future.

Using storytelling as pedagogy enables students to examine their own self-story, find meaning in relating concepts to metaphors and folklore, and experience new understandings in mental images before applying them to life situations. Supporting teaching strategies with stories enhances the process of educating students in the area of resiliency. The question for this study, then, was: How do first semester freshmen involved in RDE make meaning of resiliency in their lives through the pedagogy of storytelling?

Background of the Study

It was during a meeting of the Academic Standards Committee, at a midsized Midwestern research university, that discussion began focusing on concerns raised when reviewing written requests by students to be reinstated after a period of dismissal from the university for lack of satisfactory academic progress. As committee members discussed the requests, they began observing a repeated pattern among students who had been dismissed. More often than not, they found that students' responses to adverse situations in their lives were devastation and an inability to grasp perspective. The issues seemed to raise barriers

and would result in poor class attendance, missed assignments, poor workmanship, and often dropping out of the class. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the students had not developed any productive strategies to address life challenges. The insight into this perplexing trend prompted one of the committee members to suggest resiliency education for beginning post secondary students.

Research is adamant that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Awareness of the factors that characterize a resilient person can only enhance the probability of reacting in a resilient way when an adverse situation arises. Therefore, a learning component about resiliency development for post-secondary students would contain opportunities to understand, internalize, and “try on” resiliency. Just as learning strategies involved in knowing the protocols of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) so well that they become an automatic response, the goal of teaching resiliency development would be to allow students to internalize the nature of resilient behaviors and characteristics so resiliency would become an automatic response when adversity came to call. The ultimate goal, then, of resiliency education would be to provoke an understanding of resilient behaviors and, therefore, a desire to augment choices of response in the face of difficult life challenges.

Understanding the student experiences and perceptions after exposure to RDE could lead to tactical undertakings in resiliency education at the college level that have the potential to greatly impact retention. This RDE project explored how to encourage students to rise above those adverse situations and work through them in a healthy productive manner. In essence, I was curious as to how I could help students to grow into resilient young adults

through intentional instruction. The project, then, encompassed a curriculum that would be actualized in a classroom setting.

Part of the curriculum was implemented in a freshman class through a leadership and learning academy at a Midwestern university. The academy offers two semester-long courses. The first course, which included the sessions on resiliency, is designed with an emphasis on: (a) learning about learning, (b) learning about self, (c) purposefully developing community, (d) deliberately practicing and refining skills to support and encourage the growth of self and others, (e) practicing metacognition, and (f) engaging in intentional mental processing. In addition to affording plenty of individual talk time, weekly two and one half-hour meetings provide opportunities for students to participate in frequent team learning. Consistent with the goal of helping students manage and control their own growth and development while supporting the learning of their colleagues, the team learning opportunities centered around the science of learning and the deliberate development of community.

Four sessions of RDE were taught to forty-seven first semester freshmen in the leadership and learning academy. A lead professor along with four supporting faculty facilitate the class. During the sessions of resiliency development, I participated as a co-facilitator. The curriculum was designed as a tool to engage students in the awareness and development of resiliency. Each session involved a variety of activities and learning components focused on internalizing an understanding of resiliency as well as an opportunity for self-discovery of protective factors. The students learned about the protective factors through a potpourri of learning strategies. Stories and metaphors were a major focus of the class because of the power a story has to imprint an image and provide clarity of

understanding. There were continual checks for understanding and opportunities to reflect and share about the learning experience.

While conducting the sessions, the co-facilitators and participating faculty began to notice significant changes in many of the students. It was as if they were practicing new behaviors and deeply reflecting upon what they had learned about in the sessions on resiliency, then applying their new understandings to their lives. As we shared our observations with each other, it became apparent that the students were beginning to connect past and present situations to their new awareness of resiliency. For example, some of the students began sharing moments they handled differently by using various tools learned in class, such as reframing and self-talk. They became more confident in expressing the protective factors they had identified in themselves and how they could use them to address challenges or adversity. As the co-facilitators and faculty listened to and observed the students in class, it became evident that there were a number of students who really had made their own meaning of resiliency and were beginning to make important connections to their lives as college students. I believed it was important to find out from the students what meaning they made of the phenomenon of becoming more resilient. An email was sent to 20 of these so identified students, describing the study and requesting their participation. Instead of selecting a pre-determined number of participants, the 11 students who responded with a desire to be a part of the study were chosen.

Making meaning of resiliency in their lives is ultimately up to the students. My goal with this study was to identify reasons for changes in students' behaviors and to reveal important factors affecting the development of individual resiliency.

Methodology

In light of the various factors affecting transition and adjustment of the freshman student to the college experience, it was prudent to explore how these young adults made meaning of resiliency, the ability to deal effectively with challenges, in their lives. This section describes the methodological framework used to conduct this phenomenological study. I begin with the theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Epistemology

Exploring epistemology gives researchers an opportunity to probe the philosophical underpinnings that explain how we know what we know. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), epistemology refers to the assumptions one makes about the process of gathering knowledge. Constructionism, which informs this study, is an epistemological lens which views knowledge and “all meaningful reality as such, as contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). Meaning is constructed in relationship to something; it is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 2003).

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective that supports the methodology for this study can be found in the interpretivist philosophy. The ontology of the constructionist-interpretivist is that there are multiple valid and socially constructed realities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Therefore,

the multiple realities of the lived experience can be interpreted for meaning through the lens of perception. We can only construct meaning to what we perceive in the present, our current reality, with the knowledge we have embodied and gathered in the past.

The curriculum for the resiliency development component was designed with the intent to introduce the protective factors of resiliency to the students. Through the teaching process, the intent was to help students identify and enhance their existing protective factors as well as learn how to bring new strengths into being. For this to become a reality, it was necessary for the students to take the new knowledge and combine it with what they knew of themselves as they began the process of constructing new meaning in terms of resiliency.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach of phenomenology was deemed appropriate for this study as we discerned the “essence” of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of our theoretical activities not only in describing the essences, but also through grasping concepts rooted in the ordinary lived experience. The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty (1948, trans. 2004), believed that the phenomenological philosophy is essentially the description of the “perception” of the perceived world (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). In *The primacy of perception and other essays*, Merleau-Ponty (1964) reiterated: “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (p. 13). Merleau-Ponty believed that describing the perception was primary for phenomenology. By looking at our ordinary engagement with the world from a bit of distance, we gain clearer insight and understanding, just as we might by holding a book a little way from our eyes in order to read

better (Matthews, 2002, p. 35). As the students described their experience with RDE, the very act of putting their perceptions into language simulated the “stepping back” which elucidated, for them, the essence of the experience.

The heart of phenomenology, which informed this study, is the lived experience (Merriam, 2002). It brings into relationship the conscious subject and the object (Crotty, 2003), in this case it was the student and the notion of resiliency. As researchers, it is important that our focus is not on the humans nor on the human world, but rather on “the essence of the meaning of the interaction” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, conceived phenomenological philosophy as “re-learning to look at the world” (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). The goal of this study was to understand the phenomenon of the students’ experiences of “re-learning to look at the world” after the encounter with RDE. Phenomenology was appropriate for this study as I discerned the “essence” of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Methods

Epoche process

The phenomenological approach to the process known as Epoche is that of bracketing, or setting aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories concerning the present study in order to eliminate as much bias as possible (Moustakas, 1995). This enables the researcher to come to the data with an open mind.

At the onset of the study, it was necessary to highlight the biases that were evident in my experience as a result of the years I have spent studying resiliency. It was therefore essential that I bracket my viewpoints and beliefs in order to prevent the assimilation of my

thoughts into that of the participants. I diligently reflected regularly through journaling and personal contemplation my preconceptions and biases in connection to my understanding of resiliency. The isolation of my previous beliefs, assumptions, and biases was pertinent to the study and the epoche process. I believe:

- It is possible for one to learn to be resilient.
- There are certain characteristics that can be found in resilient people such as intrapersonal skills, optimism, social competence, the skill of problem solving, and the ability to set goals and look forward to something in the future.
- People who are not resilient are not always suicidal or otherwise maladjusted.
- Resiliency is essential for fulfillment in life.
- Resiliency is seen in response to a plethora of challenges – large and small.
- Resiliency is an attitude that is reflected in behaviors, feelings, and beliefs.
- Resiliency brings responsibility to the forefront: that of choice, action, and thought.
- We can affect another's resiliency by providing a caring environment, and having healthy expectations and opportunities to be a part of and contribute to an organization or relationship.
- Knowing one's strengths contributes to one's resiliency.

Throughout the process of data collection, I reviewed this list in order to maintain my current focus on the lived experiences of the students.

Participants

The Midwestern university made available four sessions in a leadership and learning academy in which the curriculum for resiliency development was delivered. This two-credit class met weekly for two and a half hours. The class was comprised of 47 freshmen students from a variety of majors: animal ecology, business, diet and exercise, elementary education, exercise science, horticulture, physical therapy, and veterinary science. Qualitative research, steeped in a search for meaning necessitates selecting participants who can bring rich and meaningful data to the table. Since the “idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants...that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the

research question” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185), the participants for this study were purposefully selected. The participants were identified through a set of sampling criteria that aligned with the purpose of the study. Through written assignments and observations, I purposefully chose to include students who indicated an interest in deeply understanding the protective factors, experimenting with the skills of resiliency (which included reframing and self-talk), showed a desire (through conversation and written assignments) to know more about the concept, and who seemed to have experienced the observed phenomenon of making meaning of resiliency in their lives after participating in RDE. Phenomenological studies emphasize an in-depth focus on the experience with the phenomenon and therefore tend to have smaller sample sizes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Among the 11 participants in the study there were nine females and two males; all were freshmen students between 18 and 19 years of age. Four of the participants were first generation college students, and all were Caucasian and from the Midwest. There were a variety of academic undergraduate majors: three in animal ecology; two in horticulture; two in elementary education; one in exercise science and physical therapy; one in diet and exercise; one in business; and one in a pre-veterinary program.

Data collection

In order to gather rich and meaningful data, the goal of a phenomenological study, one of the principal methods used by researchers is the interview (Merriam, 2002), the “heart of social research” according to Esterberg (2002, p. 83). The most effective interviews are usually in-depth, semi-structured, and guided with open-ended questions. Since this type of

interview is non-scripted, the data are described in the words of the participants, providing authentic insight and perspective (Esterberg, 2002). Data collection began with two focus group interviews; one group consisted of seven participants and the other had four. Two different sessions were held to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Each 45-minute session was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The focus group interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that afforded the participants ample opportunity to project whatever thoughts, experiences, and understandings they wished to share.

Face-to-face individual interviews were then conducted with each of the 11 participants. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Using the semi-structured format of the focus group, the participants had the opportunity to share personal meaning in reference to their experiences with the resiliency curriculum. In addition to the focus group and individual interviews, data were collected from the students' journals, other assignments, and end-of-semester written summaries of their learning. Data were collected until saturation of the sampling occurred, the point at which similar information began to be heard, observed, or read (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Data analysis and interpretation

Themes in phenomenology are the repeated thoughts or the description of experiences that highlight the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon becomes better understood as it is found, named, and amplified through the process of analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The process of analyzing the data for this study was formulated based on the steps described by Colaizzi (1978). At the start of the analysis, all transcripts and journal entries were carefully read in order to understand the essence of the students'

written and oral reflections as well as to be mindful of reoccurring topics. After a coding procedure was developed, the transcripts and journal entries were read a second time using a color-coded system to highlight significant statements, repeated themes or concepts, duplicated descriptions and understandings, and similar meanings derived from the experiences with RDE. Rereading and sorting the coded statements enabled me to identify potential meanings from the data. Finally, themes that had emerged from the data were constructed and integrated to produce an exhaustive description (Colaizzi, 1978) of the students' experiences. Using that description as a basis, a statement of identification of the phenomenon's fundamental structure was articulated. The data were checked for validity by returning them to the participants for confirmation. These findings were validated in three ways: (a) taking themes back to the participants for feedback; (b) employing peer-debriefing; and (c) engaging in conversation with outside observers (Creswell, 2003).

Findings

The themes ubiquitous within this study were: (1) the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling; (2) the value of learning in community; and (3) the transformative resiliency development of post-secondary student. The fundamental structure of becoming more resilient, then, as perceived by the participants, was a self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners, and then intentionally applying the learning to their own lives. This complex statement is potent with possible options to explore for students and educators alike. However, this article addresses the meaning post-secondary students derived from the exposure to storytelling as a medium of instruction in RDE.

Innovation in teaching methods is welcomed by many institutions in a day when students are increasingly conversant with highly creative methods of dispersing information via internet access (Braxton, 2004; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). During this study, an interesting method of enhancing student learning occurred unintentionally. It did not involve a new, excitingly different method, but rather, a technique that is as old as the world itself. That innovative approach is known simply as ‘storytelling.’

Storytelling is one of the most basic ways of sharing what we know, making sense of our experiences, and gaining insight into ourselves and our relationships with others in our world (McAdams, 1993). The RDE curriculum incorporated storytelling as part of the pedagogy in a variety of ways throughout the sessions. In order for the students to gain a deeper understanding of themselves in relationship to resiliency, it was necessary for them to explore their own stories. The RDE sessions included activities that enhanced this understanding by allowing them to share their stories, hear concepts of resiliency explained through metaphors, and consider how different aspects of resiliency could be illustrated through folktales.

Throughout these sessions, stories based on folklore, personal illustrations, and reference to the self-story were used to enhance the curriculum by making connections and analogies to correspond with the concepts being taught. This study examined the experiences the students had with the immersion in storytelling within the curriculum for development of resiliency.

For more than 20 years, I have studied stories, performed them, and used them as a tool to teach and counsel students. The resiliency development curriculum for college students was initially deliberately designed without using stories as a conduit for teaching

resiliency. I wanted the curriculum for resiliency development to be generic enough that a teacher without a background in storytelling could teach it effectively to students. However, during the planning meetings intended to refine the sessions that would be taught to the students in the academy for learning and leadership, I shared stories that were fitting to illustrate the concepts. As my co-facilitator and I collaborated, it became evident to us that the stories needed to be a part of the learning sessions. The response of the students during and after those sessions assured us that our decision to incorporate storytelling to enhance student learning was exceptionally significant.

Stories are a vehicle to transfer meaning and understanding in a safe and unthreatening environment. By using stories, I was able to present an abstract concept, such as resiliency, in a concrete form. Sharing stories at strategic points in the curriculum enabled us to enhance and deepen the understanding of resiliency. The data attested to the importance of using stories to augment comprehension of what resiliency is and how it can be applied and lived out in our everyday lives. This finding was initially revealed as the students experienced meaning through the writing of their *self-stories*.

Self-story

The introductory sessions focused on building an awareness of self. I first wanted students to understand the stories of their lives that brought them to this point. Given paper bags, each student was to return to class with “My Life in a Bag.” The students were given the opportunity to think about their past experiences and then to represent them using five objects or representations which they put in a paper bag (Livo & Rietz, 1987; Pellowski, 1987). The stories around those artifacts were to tell something about themselves. The

meaning that the students discovered through this experience highlighted the sessions and often propelled them to see who they were in a new light.

The self-story seemed to evoke a deeper understanding for students of not only who they are today, but also who they had been before as they reflected on the persons of their younger personas. From that point, they could make connections between their former and present day behaviors or characteristics. As Laura discovered:

Our Life in a Bag” was a really neat assignment because it really made me think about what was really important in my life and what made me who I am today... even the smallest things in life can impact you and affect who you are.

By reflecting on past experiences, the participants discovered personal meaning from those experiences by connecting them to what they were learning about resiliency. Revisiting unpleasant memories was not always easy, but often worthwhile as Mary revealed in her journal:

Most of my stories that I wrote and didn't write had the feeling of anger and sadness tied to them. I was put in the middle of a lot of my parents' fights and was let down a lot. I know what it feels like and know that I will not put my own children through the same thing. Situations that have gone on between my parents will always stay with me. I will never ever forget them. They have changed who I am today.

A sense of appreciation for the learning or growth often replaced the resentment and tamed the anger for having to endure emotional pain. Mary goes on to put a positive frame around her past:

In a way, I'm kind of glad they occurred because I feel they made me more mature and able to handle a lot more for my age. A person who is resilient has buoyancy and adaptation in their lifestyle. I feel that I have some of these characteristics in my life. Resiliency has truly taken on a new meaning for me.

Responses to adversity have almost always involved emotion. Resiliency is often exhibited in persons who know how their emotions affect their thinking and their reactions to

events in their lives (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Laura has a keen understanding of the role emotions play in her thinking:

It was a rough semester for me, so learning about it [RDE] really helped me get through everything. There was a lot, a lot of emotional that I was dealing with, and stuff, and I mean, I'm still dealing with it, but it's [knowledge of resiliency] helped in everything.

Experiences with loss and difficult issues are not always easy for college-age students to handle. However, by using the self-story, the students were given a big-picture view of their previous experiences and how they grew and adapted through them, often by changing or altering their perspectives. In this same way, Kelli was able to deal with more dramatic changes her family would soon face:

In looking back at the emotions tied to each of my stories, I can tell that there is a lot of diverse emotion happening in my life. The big, sad emotion was finding out my dad is going back to active duty [having already served one tour fighting the war in Iraq]. I'm the kind of person, though, that likes to look at the positives of things and I even wrote down that he'll be happy and that's what makes me happy. Looking back on it, it really makes me think that I'm a lucky person!

Understanding the manner in which the brain links emotion and memory gives insight and appreciation for the strong connections we have for memories that were difficult or painful in our lives (Goleman, 1995). Resiliency occurs when one is able to view those experiences as fertile ground for personal growth. In her journal, Andrea described how she has come to understanding her strength or resiliency by looking at the hardships faced in her past:

In almost every case I can trace my "strength" or "resiliency" to my past experiences. It's unfortunate, but true, that the majority of my past experiences that have helped to develop my resiliency were bad or sad experiences. As much as my experiences stunk, it's cool to look back on them and see that they've helped me grow into a better person...they've repeatedly taught me and shown me that life continues even during hard times, and after

these hard times, it's so important to gather yourself and essentially bounce back despite the hardship.

Illustrating through folklore

Throughout the remaining sessions, storytelling was used as a way to define, identify characteristics, explain the components, and introduce tools of resiliency. A menu of stories, used to illustrate the concepts of resiliency, was presented in the form of metaphors, folklore, or personal experiences. The modus operandi was always in the oral tradition without using visual aids, but, instead, the listener's imagination so that the participant could visualize an actual mental scene in which behaviors could be rehearsed or "tried on." One of the stories particularly meaningful to the students was *The spyglass* written by Richard Paul Evans (2000). The repeating phrase found in the story, "You have seen what might be, now go and make it so," seemed to resonate with the students long after the story ended. As Adam wrote:

Today I was thinking about the "Spyglass" story that was told a couple of weeks ago. It was a really inspirational story. If you look at something from a different perspective, it becomes 10 times better than it was. The quote that was repeated, "You have seen what may be, now go and make it so." It made me rethink a lot of different things in my life. That story meant a lot to me in how it influenced me personally because it has happened to me. I will do my best to go and make it so.

It's powerful to consider that even while the imagination is creating the scenes of the story, another part of the mind can generate application to a real-life situation. Carla found this to be true:

I think the stories were crucial because it got me thinking. When I'm listening to a story I put myself in that story and it causes me to care, and it gives you a picture to associate with things like. What comes to mind sometimes for me is the bridge story, and how the two brothers were not willing to make amends. That's like my best friend and me. There are times where I need to be a better brother than in that story. I saw things like that just really come to mind when I'm walking through life since there's that very clear message in those stories.

The passage of time dims some details, but the essence of the story lingers. Even though nearly three months elapsed from the sessions to the interviews for this study, Allison recalled a story and the impact it had on her:

The stories were huge! They helped connect to real life situations. You know the Toll Booth one? [It taught the message], you know you just can't let stuff like that get you down. You gotta keep moving forward. You gotta do what you want. I mean the stories had a real life connection versus, "Ok, read your textbook, this is what it says." It doesn't make a connection, where all the stories, well, they could be real people, and they connect with other people, so... I can read my chemistry book 30 times, and I'm not gonna connect to it, but the stories are what makes the connection for me.

Reflecting upon the nature of the brain to retain emotional memories, when a burst of insight is gained after seeing a connection, the chances of remembering it for a long time increase dramatically (Sprenger, 1999) which Andrea attested to in her journal:

The stories are just something that always sticks in your mind. It's just kind of like an "aha" thing. I think it's like a role model almost, even though it's fictional. It's just like something that... affects people for a day, maybe it affects people for a week, maybe it affects people forever, but I think a story is something people can really hang on to...

Stories need to be chosen carefully, with intentional purpose when incorporating them into a curriculum. It was not happenstance that particular stories were used to teach resiliency. They were each chosen with purposeful intent. Students are keenly aware when course content is filler and when it is dynamically intentional to which Mary alluded:

...it made us visualize the story and connect it to what we were learning. It wasn't like, just thrown in there, "here's a good story," or "story time," but I mean, it made me connect the things. I remember the story about the dog ... and then the builder of the bridge and it was when we were remembering, or trying to learn the autonomy and sense of purpose, problem solving, stuff like that, but it really made things connect, and I enjoyed the story a lot more because then I connect them, and I'd actually think about the words ... and be like, "Oh, this is the definitions of this."

Purposeful intent in using stories as a teaching tool encompasses not only a desire for retention, but they also need to be pertinent to the subject matter.

Using stories as an instructional tool allows the students to not only check for their understanding, but also to measure their growth. By mere repetition from an instructor or through the mental rehearsal of the listener, the story can act as a gauge to show the students' progress from one point in life to another. Adam brought this meaning to light during the individual interview:

There was one story that stuck out in particular. It was the one about the king and he had you look through the glass and then said, "You've seen what can be, so go and make it so..." Being able to see, like, how much better I've become from this semester, being able to see how much better I could be, like I've seen how much I've grown this far, like how much further can I grow? I remember like, they were looking at some old garden that didn't have anything and they looked through it and they could see green vegetables and tomatoes, and all that stuff, when I hit that it was like, it's just like me, looking at, looking at myself in the mirror, it's sort of the same thing, like if I could be a lot better than this, I look at it and it's like, oh yeah, I could be a lot better, and so then I'd go and do it.

Illustrating through metaphors

Metaphors are figurative descriptions of a concept. When one is able to express a concept in the rhetoric of a metaphor, then true understanding has transpired. It did not seem to take long for the students to adapt to the tool of using their own metaphors to assist in their understanding. During the focus group, Adam explained how it [the concept of resiliency] suddenly made sense to him:

I had an "aha" moment when we first started talking about resiliency. I didn't really, like understand the meaning of resiliency, until the day when we brought out the rubber bands. It's like, you can be stretched to your limit and you'll be stretched there for a really long time, but you'll come back, like you'll come back to normal, like just the small little circle of your rubber band. But if you keep being stretched and come back, you keep stretching it

out and there's a possibility that it will break the next time that you pull it back out again, so it's like, you don't wanna be pulled out to the max every time, about halfway maybe, and then back down.

Resiliency has often been defined as the ability to “bounce back,” successfully adapt to the effects of adversity, and develop a social competence even in the face of severe stress resulting from personal or environmental challenges or trauma (Benard, 1991). Karen summarized the basics of seeing resiliency at work in her life with this analogy:

I learned what resiliency was. That was huge, just learning that it was an option for your life, to be like, “you don't have to carry all that, you can learn to bounce back from stuff.”

Self-stories, folklore and metaphors paved the way to introduce the concept of personal protective factors, reframing and self-talk, all tools pivotal to resiliency. Metaphorical thinking enabled the students to relate how strengths and protective factors impact their actions and ways of dealing with their life issues. The mind's eye or in other words, the imagination allowed the students to envision (reframe) an alternative way of looking at a challenge or adverse situation by creating a new “story” to live by. In the same manner, using self-talk simply involved generating a dialogue that encouraged a new behavior or way of facing an issue. Mary demonstrated her ability to reframe her childhood in such a way that she could look at her future as a place where past wrongs could be amended:

I guess, just looking at the situation and knowing again, that it could be a lot worse, cause in my life, like, I had a terrible childhood, so then that makes me look at my future and how I want to shape my future and what kind of job I wanna have, so I know my kids don't have to go through the stress that I had to go through, cause of my parents and because of their mess-ups.

Donna also saw reframing as a tool that would enable her to stop and review the situation, then adjust her course of action.

Reframing has taught me the importance of stopping and examining a situation. I always knew this was important but never applied it much. This exercise of reframing situations is making me apply this method of thinking. I tend to be negative or look at the negative in situations. Reframing has been teaching me to slow down and think things through along with re-examining a situation. Reframing this situation doesn't make the problem go away but it helps me to think clearly and remain calm during this situation.

The art of reframing allowed the students to consciously adjust their perspective while experiencing a stressful or difficult situation so that they could maneuver through the circumstance with a hopeful attitude. Reflecting upon the result of consciously practicing reframing, Laura indicated the benefit in her daily life:

I think everyone uses reframing or self-talk in some way in our life without even knowing it, but then, when you actually consciously think about it and make an effort to step back, look at a situation and think, "is this really as big as I'm making it, or is it just something really small, and so, I mean, that's helped a lot, and just kind of keep reminding myself, you know, it's just a few months of my whole entire life, it's not gonna be life affecting..."

Metaphorically speaking, perhaps the students in essence learned to "re-story" their lives in order to successfully navigate the challenges facing them everyday.

Using the medium of story to present the various concepts embedded in RDE, the students made meaning by allowing the stories (be it their self-stories or illustrative stories) to make deep and lasting connections to the information. They used the stories as a place to practice what they learned about resiliency and then apply it to their everyday lives. Using stories to connect abstract concepts to students' lives allowed the curriculum to become more meaningful to the students, and, thus, they were able to perceive resiliency in their lives by connecting the past, present, and future experiences. Merleau-Ponty (1948, trans. 2004), the French phenomenologist, claimed that our perceptual experience should be deducted with a reasoning or knowledge structure:

It is our “bodily” intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations. (p. 10)

The story of experience holds power in the process of shaping not only our perception, but, our character and values. With a keen sense of understanding that power, White (1982) related, “...what is imprinted deeply on our minds in our youth shapes who we are and what we shall become. The stories, the dreams we live by, are vital for our growth” (p. 22).

Discussion

As students identified with the messages of the stories, their responses to the use of story during the sessions attested to the importance and value of narrative as a methodology in education. They bore support to the research that stories are vehicles that bring us to a better understanding of our lives (Kilpatrick, 1993). Stories encapsulate clues by which educators, listening to the stories of the students, can use to know what is real and important to them and thus know what questions to ask that will enhance their learning (Collins & Cooper, 1997).

Karen gave voice to the importance of the story as a tool of instruction:

The stories told really made an impact on how we learned the protective factors. It made the lesson more engaging and interesting. It made me realize that everything, story or situation, has a way of turning out for the best. I just have to look for it. By looking for the key factor in situations, I'll be able to find the underlying meaning in almost everything. I hope to continue using the tools I have learned while in this class. I hope to continue to be resilient.

The story is invaluable as a tool be it used as a metaphor, which connects abstract concepts to concrete understanding, folklore that enables one to immerse in mental practice,

or the self-story which encourages exploration and analysis of one's identity. With this evidence, it is paramount that educators seek ways to incorporate stories as a method of furthering the academic as well as enriching the personal experiences of students. Andrea framed it well from the perspective of a learner:

I can almost 100% guarantee myself that five, ten years from now I won't remember many details or concepts from my classes such as biology or chemistry, but there is no doubt in my mind that I will regularly use the concepts and ideas discussed throughout this course and of all of the topics covered so far.

It would appear there is a way to prevent students from being devastated by crisis, challenges, or setbacks as was often observed by Academic Standards Committee members who initiated the original project. The potential exists within RDE that through the thoughtful use of stories, students may learn to address the adversity they meet with resilient behaviors and attitudes. The students in this study were able to make personal meaning and apply it to their lives through their understanding of the protective factors, as well as their abilities to use the tools of reframing and self-talk to confront and address the issues they faced. Critical to this understanding was the story—whether it was metaphor, folklore, or self-story—that provided the insight and virtual practice to face future obstacles. If the use of story encompasses such a magnitude of possibilities to affect the connections students make with their ability to be resilient, shouldn't we, as educators, enthusiastically embrace this pedagogical concept with which to teach our students?

Conclusion

The stories of experience hold power in the process of shaping not only our perception, but also our character and values. With a keen understanding of that power,

White (1982) related, “what is imprinted deeply on our minds in our youth shapes who we are and what we shall become. The stories, the dreams we live by, are vital for our growth” (p. 22). If the use of story encompasses such a magnitude of possibilities to affect the connections students make with their ability to be resilient, why would we, as educators, not enthusiastically embrace this pedagogical concept with which to teach our students?

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CHAPTER 5. LEARNING IN COMMUNITY: A PASSAGEWAY TO RESILIENCY

by Kristine M. Meyer

A paper submitted to *Learning Communities Journal*

“Community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships.” *Parker Palmer, 1998*

Abstract

Learning communities offer the potential to help college students develop the abilities to productively meet the many challenges they will face in the years directly following high school. The resiliency students develop within a supportive group of peers can affect not only their success as students but also a lasting ability to face challenges and adversity during their adult lives. This article examines the findings of a phenomenological study of eleven students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) during their first semester. The data confirmed that in a community of learners where there are caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to contribute and participate, students are able to meaningfully adapt their new understanding of resiliency into their lives, and enhance choices and behaviors characteristic of resilient individuals.

Introduction

The core mission of education is the charge of knowing, teaching, and learning (Palmer, 1998). By learning in community, this mission is enhanced as students expand their knowing by sharing and receiving knowledge from others, experience the benefits of being taught in a personal manner, and learn in an environment that freely gives voice to questions that bring them to new understandings. Resiliency has often been defined as the ability “to

recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune” (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001, p. 7).

When a part of a learning community, students are able to develop the abilities of resiliency needed to productively meet the many challenges they will face in college and beyond into their adult lives. Community provides students with a safe place in which to challenge their beliefs and assumptions, try on new behaviors and attitudes, and experience encouragement from fellow learners and teachers who see potential strengths and goodness of character helpful when encountering challenging or difficult situations in life. A safe, supportive community of learners has the potential to help students adopt the characteristics of resilient people when participating in RDE.

Since the longitudinal resiliency study of children on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai by Werner and Smith (1982), much attention has been devoted to researching the phenomenon of resiliency. There is now conclusive evidence that resiliency can be taught. Through research, certain identifying characteristics of resiliency, known as “protective factors” (Benard, 2004, p. 44) have been discovered. Although researchers have identified variety of lists describing various protective factors (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), this study focused on the four identified by Benard (1993, 2004): social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Qualities of each of the protective factors need not be present for one to be considered resilient. But research has determined that even some of the characteristics of any of the four increased the abilities of a person to rebound from adverse situations.

The four protective factors as identified by Benard (1993, 2004) include a wide range of qualities. People who exemplify social competence are often responsive, flexible, empathetic, caring, possess good communications skills, and a sense of humor. Socially

competent people easily form relationships with family and friends both in school and in the community. Those who are problem solvers demonstrate the ability to think abstractly, seeing a number of possible solutions to a problem. Those with problem-solving skills are independent, can plan, think creatively, and utilize resources. Autonomous people have a strong sense of identity and can often separate themselves from dysfunctional family environments. They are good decisions makers and have an internal locus of control. Those who have a sense of purpose have goals, aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future.

Learning a concept, such as resiliency, involves much self-reflection and sharing. This type of learning is best experienced in an environment that includes caring relationships, opportunities to contribute and participate, and a sense of safety—attributes of a learning community. This study explored students' perceptions of their experiences with RDE and how learning in community brought them to a deeper understanding of the concept of resiliency.

Background of the Study

It was during a meeting of the Academic Standards Committee, at a midsized Midwestern research university, that discussion began focusing on concerns raised when reviewing written requests by students to be reinstated after a period of dismissal from the university for lack of satisfactory academic progress. As committee members discussed the requests, they began observing a repeated pattern among students who had been dismissed. More often than not, they found students responding to adverse situations in their lives with devastation and an inability to grasp perspective. The issues seemed to raise barriers and

would result in poor class attendance, missed assignments, poor workmanship, and often dropping out of the class. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the students had not developed any productive strategies to address life challenges. The insight into this perplexing trend prompted one of the committee members to suggest resiliency education for beginning post secondary students.

Research supports the premise that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Awareness of the factors that characterize a resilient person can only enhance the probability of reacting in a resilient way when an adverse situation arises. Therefore, a learning component about resiliency development for post-secondary students would contain opportunities to understand, internalize, and “try on” resiliency. The ultimate goal of RDE would be to allow students to internalize the nature of resilient behaviors and characteristics as well as increase the choices of response in the face of difficult life challenges.

Understanding the students’ experiences and perceptions after exposure to RDE could lead to tactical undertakings in resiliency education at the college level that have the potential to greatly impact retention. This RDE project explored how to encourage students to rise above those adverse situations and work through them in a healthy productive manner. In essence, I was curious as to how I could help students to grow into resilient young adults through intentional instruction. Then the project would encompass a curriculum that would be actualized in a classroom setting.

Part of the curriculum was implemented in a leadership and learning academy at a Midwestern university. The academy is offered in two semester-long courses. The first course, which included the sessions on resiliency, is designed with an emphasis on: (a)

learning about learning; (b) learning about self; (c) purposefully developing community; (d) deliberately practicing and refining skills to support and encourage the growth of self and others; (e) practicing metacognition; and (f) engaging in intentional mental processing. In addition to affording plenty of individual talk time, weekly two and one half-hour meetings provide opportunities for students to participate in frequent team learning. Consistent with the goal of helping students manage and control their own growth and development while supporting the learning of their colleagues, the team learning opportunities are centered around both the science of learning and the deliberate development of community.

Since many freshmen in post-secondary education are often enrolled in large lecture classes, this class is designed with the intent to expose students to a new way of learning. To reduce student resistance to this type of learning, not only is it important for educators to set expectations of participation and interaction and to hold students accountable for meeting them, but it is also critical for them to provide a supportive environment to nurture the growth. Short, non-threatening activities—icebreakers, go 'rounds, warm-ups, mixers, etc.—provide opportunities for interaction while students learn more about themselves and others. Especially during these early interactions, those in charge must foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect by modeling appropriate behaviors and insisting students engage in supportive actions.

Four sessions of RDE were taught to forty-seven first semester freshmen facilitated by a lead professor and four supporting faculty. The curriculum was designed as a tool to engage students in the awareness and development of resiliency. Each session involved a variety of activities and learning components focused on internalizing an understanding of resiliency as well as an opportunity for a self-discovery of protective factors. There were

continual checks for understanding and opportunity to reflect and share about the learning experience.

While conducting the sessions, the co-facilitators and participating faculty began to notice significant changes in many of the students. It was as if they were practicing new behaviors, deeply reflecting upon what they had learned about in the sessions on resiliency, connecting past and present situations, and applying their new understandings in their lives with new awareness. For example, some of the students began sharing moments they handled differently using various tools learned in class, such as reframing and self-talk. They became more confident in expressing the protective factors they had identified in themselves and how they have used or plan to use them to address challenges or adversity. As the co-facilitators and faculty listened to and observed the students in class, it became evident that there were a number of students who really had made their own meaning of resiliency and were beginning to make important connections to their lives as college students. I believed it was important to find out from the students what meaning they made of the phenomenon of becoming more resilient. An email was sent to 20 students, so identified, describing the study and requesting their participation. Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Making meaning of resiliency in their lives is ultimately up to the students. My goal with this study was to identify reasons for changes in students' behaviors and to reveal important factors affecting the development of individual resiliency.

Methodology

In light of the various factors affecting transition and adjustment of the freshman student to the college experience, it was prudent to explore how these young adults made

meaning of resiliency, the ability to deal effectively with challenges, in their lives. The following describes the methodological framework used to conduct this phenomenological study. I begin with the theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Epistemology

Exploring epistemology gives researchers an opportunity to wander in the charted areas of the philosophical underpinnings that explain how we know what we know. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), epistemology refers to the assumptions one makes about the process of gathering knowledge. Constructionism, which informs this study, is an epistemological lens which views knowledge and “all meaningful reality as such, as contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 2003, p. 42). Meaning is constructed in relationship to something, it is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 2003).

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective that supports the methodology for this study can be found in the interpretivist philosophy. The ontology of the constructionist-interpretivist is that there are multiple valid and socially constructed realities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Therefore, the multiple realities of the lived experience can be interpreted for meaning through the lens of perception. We can only construct meaning to what we perceive in the present, our current reality, with the knowledge we have embodied and gathered in the past.

The curriculum for the resiliency development component was designed with the intent to introduce the protective factors of resiliency to the students. Through the teaching process, the intent was to help students identify and enhance their existing protective factors as well as learn how to bring new strengths into being. For this to become a reality, it was necessary for the students to take the new knowledge and combine it with what they knew of themselves as they began the process of constructing new meaning in terms of resiliency.

Methodology

The methodological approach of phenomenology was deemed appropriate for this study as we discerned the “essence” of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of our theoretical activities not only in describing the essences, but also through grasping roots in the ordinary lived experience. The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty (1964), believed that the phenomenological philosophy is essentially the description of the “perception” of the perceived world (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). In *The primacy of perception and other essays*, Merleau-Ponty (1964) reiterated: “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (p. 13). Merleau-Ponty believed that describing the perception was primary for phenomenology. By looking at our ordinary engagement with the world from a bit of distance, we gain clearer insight and understanding, just as we might by holding a book a little way from our eyes in order to read better (Matthews, 2002, p. 35). As the students described their experience with RDE, the very act of putting their perceptions into language simulated the “stepping back” which elucidated, for them, the essence of the experience.

The heart of phenomenology, which informed this study, is the lived experience (Merriam, 2002). It brings into relationship the conscious subject and the object (Crotty, 2003), in this case the student and the notion of resiliency. As researchers, it is important that our focus is not on the humans nor on the human world, but rather on “the essence of the meaning of the interaction” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, conceived phenomenological philosophy as “re-learning to look at the world” (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). The goal of this study was to gain a complete understanding of the phenomenon of the students’ experiences of “re-learning to look at the world” after the encounter with RDE. Phenomenology was appropriate for this study as I discerned the “essence” of the experiences as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Methods

Epoche process

The phenomenological approach to the process, known as epoche, is that of bracketing, or setting aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories concerning the present study in order to eliminate as much bias as possible (Moustakas, 1995). This enables the researcher to come to the data with an open mind.

At the onset of the study, it was necessary to highlight the biases that were evident in my experience as a result of the years I have spent developing resiliency. It was, therefore, essential that I bracket my viewpoints and beliefs in order to prevent the assimilation of my thoughts into that of the participants. I diligently reflected regularly through journaling and personal contemplation my preconceptions and biases in connection to my understanding of

resiliency. Pertinent to the study and the epoche process was the isolation of my previous beliefs, assumptions, and biases. I believe:

- It is possible for one to learn to be resilient.
- There are certain characteristics that can be found in resilient people such as intrapersonal skills, optimism, social competence, the skill of problem solving, and the ability to set goals and look forward to something in the future.
- People who are not resilient are not always suicidal or otherwise maladjusted.
- Resiliency is essential for fulfillment in life.
- Resiliency is seen in response to a plethora of challenges – large and small.
- Resiliency is an attitude that is reflected in behaviors, feelings, and beliefs.
- Resiliency brings responsibility to the forefront: that of choice, action, and thought.
- We can affect another's resiliency by providing a caring environment, and having healthy expectations and opportunities to be a part of and contribute to an organization or relationship.
- Knowing one's strengths contributes to one's resiliency.

Throughout the process of data collection, I would intermittently review this list in order to maintain my current focus on the lived experiences of the students.

Participants

The Midwestern university made available four sessions in a leadership and learning academy in which the curriculum for resiliency development was delivered. This two-credit class met weekly for two and a half hours. The class was comprised of 47 freshmen students from a variety of majors: animal ecology, business, diet and exercise, elementary education, exercise science, horticulture, physical therapy, and veterinary science. Qualitative research, steeped in a search for meaning necessitates selecting participants who can bring rich and meaningful data to the table. Since the “idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants...that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185), the participants for this study were purposefully selected. The participants were identified through a set of sampling criteria that that aligned

with the purpose of the study. Through written assignments and observations, I purposefully chose to include students who indicated an interest in deeply understanding the protective factors, experimenting with the skills of resiliency (which included reframing and self-talk), showed a desire (through conversation and written assignments) to know more about the concept, and who seemed to have experienced the observed phenomenon of making meaning of resiliency in their lives after participating in RDE. Phenomenological studies emphasize an in-depth focus on the experience with the phenomenon and therefore tend to have smaller sample sizes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Among the 11 participants in the study there were nine females and two males; all were freshmen students between 18 and 19 years of age. Four of the participants were first generation college students, and all were Caucasian and from the Midwest. There were a variety of academic undergraduate majors: three in animal ecology; two in horticulture; two in elementary education; one in exercise science and physical therapy; one in diet and exercise; one in business; and one in a pre-veterinary program.

Data collection

In order to gather rich and meaningful data, the goal of a phenomenological study, one of the principal methods used by researchers is the interview (Merriam, 2002), the “heart of social research” according to Esterberg (2002, p. 83). The most effective interviews are usually in-depth, semi-structured, and guided with open-ended questions. Since this type of interview is non-scripted, the data are described in the words of the participants, providing authentic insight and perspective (Esterberg, 2002). Data collection began with two focus

group interviews; one group consisted of seven participants and the other had four. Two different sessions were held to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Each 45-minute session was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The focus group interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that afforded the participants ample opportunity to project whatever thoughts, experiences, and understandings they wished to share.

Face-to-face individual interviews were then conducted with each of the 11 participants. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Using the semi-structured format of the focus group, the participants had the opportunity to share personal meaning in reference to their experiences with the resiliency curriculum. In addition to the focus group and individual interviews, data were collected from the students' journals, other assignments, and end-of-semester written summaries of their learning. Data were collected until saturation of the sampling occurred, the point at which similar information began to be heard, observed, or read (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Data analysis and interpretation

Themes in phenomenology are the repeated thoughts or the description of experiences that highlight the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon becomes better understood as it is found, named, and amplified through the process of analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The process of analyzing the data for this study was formulated based on the steps described by Colaizzi (1978). At the start of the analysis, all transcripts and journal entries were carefully read in order to understand the essence of the students' written and oral reflections as well as to be mindful of reoccurring topics. After a coding procedure was developed, the transcripts and journal entries were read a second time using a

color-coded system to highlight significant statements, repeated themes or concepts, duplicated descriptions and understandings, and similar meanings derived from the experiences with RDE. Rereading and sorting the coded statements enabled me to identify potential meanings from the data. Finally, themes that had emerged from the data were constructed and integrated to produce an exhaustive description (Colaizzi, 1978) of the students' experiences. Using that description as a basis, a statement of identification of the phenomenon's fundamental structure was articulated. The data were checked for validity by returning them to the participants for confirmation. These findings were validated in three ways: (a) taking themes back to the participants for feedback; (b) employing peer-debriefing; and (c) engaging in conversation with outside observers (Creswell, 2003).

Findings

The themes ubiquitous with this study were: the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling, the value of learning in community, and the transformative resiliency development of post-secondary student. The fundamental structure of becoming more resilient, then, as perceived by the participants, was a self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners and then intentionally applying the learning to their own lives. This complex statement is potent with possible options to explore for students and educators alike. However, this article addresses the experiences of the students as they made meaning of resiliency, through RDE, in a community of learners.

The curriculum for RDE was designed so that it could be learned in community. Students mirrored thoughts and experiences to each other in order to gain a deeper reflection

of what resiliency looks like and how it is personally perceived. A community of learners, according to Bain (2004) can be defined by its engagement, “a commitment of faculty and students to sustaining the community and its conversation” (p. 176). During the sessions, the students were in constant interaction and conversation with each other as well as the facilitators, as they participated in activities constructed to build community while learning about resiliency.

Through the words of the participants in this study, I discovered three pertinent aspects of learning together that led to a congruent and thorough understanding of resiliency: a caring environment, high expectations, and an opportunity to participate and contribute. These elements were vital in communicating the essence of resiliency to the heart of the students and were validated within the literature on resiliency. Benard (1991) introduced these elements as integral components of a resilient community and have, over the years, formed the guiding principles for resiliency education. The data attested to the importance of the components of a caring environment, high expectations, and opportunities to participate or contribute in the meaning making of resiliency in community. I will explore those tenets through the experiences the participants had with RDE.

Community

The class, as previously mentioned, consisted of freshmen students. Because of the size of this Midwestern university, it is common for freshmen to have the majority of their classes taught in large lecture halls with hundreds of students in attendance. Consequently, because of the nature of the academy in which the RDE sessions were conducted, there were far fewer students when compared to the other classes they normally attended. However, size

was not the only thing that was unique to the class involving RDE; the content, expectations, and teaching styles were also out of the norm when compared with other classes most of these freshmen students were taking at the time. Because of this, the participants discovered that they made meaning of the content, especially that they had involved the RDE in a different way and on a different level than they probably would have in any of their other freshman core classes. In reflecting upon the differences they discovered in the learning involved in this class versus other classes, it was evident that learning in community impacted their lives as a whole. Carla described the difference it made for her:

Because it was a small group...it really created that sense of community and trust...having the same people you're talking to every week. But, I think more than that...the way in which it was taught and just how this could really enrich our lives...It's wasn't, "this is how you're gonna ace your test," but rather this is how you're going to become a stronger person through all circumstances.

The RDE sessions were constructed so that there would be ample opportunity to collaborate, communicate, and cooperate within class time. The students, accustomed to sitting passively in a lecture hall were surprised as they entered the class and experienced a different way of becoming acquainted with their new classmates.

The room in which the RDE sessions were conducted was a large-sized classroom with tables and chairs. Each week, the responsibilities were shared among the students to arrange the classroom for our unique way of teaching in community. The tables were pushed against the walls and the chairs were organized in the shape of four cloverleaves, each containing 12 chairs in a circular formation. At the start of the semester before the RDE sessions, the students had been assigned to a particular cloverleaf facilitated by a faculty member. At times the students shared as a large group and at other times they shared

intimately with the members of their cloverleaves. This seemed to allow them the opportunity to gain a sense of belonging and trust. Even though it was different and required “getting used to,” ultimately the physical environment abetted the level of sharing and trust that developed among the students and faculty:

I felt really uncomfortable and not sure how it was gonna turn out that first night. I still felt that way, even after the group activities. But, when we established those cloverleaves, and kept staying in them...that's when things allowed me to put down more of my true feelings and thoughts.

As the students began to accept protocols in the class that were unique and unlike any of their other classes, they also began to appreciate and understand the beneficial nature of the strategies of the physical as well as the content design. Andrea shared her insights:

What if we were all sitting, like a normal classroom setting, in chairs facing one direction? I just think it's really hard to be able to talk about, you know, things that are personal when everyone's just looking at someone else's head...by being in a circle and looking at each other's faces while we're discussing such personal insights and such, it's a lot more meaningful, and a lot more challenging cause you really have to look at who's around you while you're talking about yourself.

Community brought a heightened awareness that the students were not just a number. The contrast to their other class situations made it more evident in the minds of the participants as Mary explained:

Being in other classes, you're alone. You're very alone...you don't have anyone else to talk to or communicate with, share ideas with, it's just random strangers.

Donna echoed similar feelings:

[Learning in community] makes a huge difference...in lecture halls, if I ask a question it's just setting the professor back, whereas in the RDE sessions, since we had such a small class size, it was a lot easier if I had a question I didn't feel like uncomfortable to ask, and I knew my peers...that makes all the difference in the world as to how much you learn...You really had to get to know each other...Makes you feel like not so alone on the campus full of 26, 000 people..

Learning about resiliency in a community setting allowed the students to make personal meaning and to grasp a broader understanding of the concept simply by hearing the contrasting experiences and aligning them with their newfound knowledge. Allison poignantly asserted that learning in community was the bridge that enabled her to make needed connections:

I think it helped me to hear what other people thought about and some of the experiences they had. Cause it really helps to make a connection when you hear other people, like, such and such had this happen to them and this is how they bounced back ... it helps you make connections with your own past.

The components of an environment that nurtures resiliency, identified by Benard (2004) as caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution, are part of a “dynamic process in which they must work together” (p. 44). Throughout the RDE sessions, we observed these three components in action. Even though these components were not intentionally addressed in the RDE curriculum, it was exciting to see how they became a natural corollary of the class. Perhaps it was because of the setting, perhaps because of the content, nevertheless, what I thought I was observing was validated in the response from the participants.

Caring relationships

Caring relationships are conduits of support and encouragement to learners in any academic institution. Those who attest to having endured challenges or adversity often describe relationships characterized by “quiet availability,” “fundamental positive regard,” and “simple sustained kindness” (Higgins, 1994, pp. 324-25) often through a gentle touch, a smile, or nod of recognition. As the students in this community of learners became more

acquainted with each other as well as the faculty, I found that they were able to increase the meaning they made with resiliency because they felt cared for and validated as individual persons.

Even in the simple acts of caring, connections were formed. Kelli found that using each other's names formed a deeper and more caring connection within the community:

I think our cloverleaf leader was doing that all the time [calling students by name]. Every time she said my name, it made me feel like she actually cared what I was about to say, or she really was focused on me at that point in time. It's just kind of like you feel more cared about, I guess, and more like you're wanted.

As the students learned that the professors involved with the academy sincerely cared for them, they began to open up and share more of their personal feelings and opinions. Carla credited this to the perception that the faculty was careful to validate each response by the students in the class:

I think all of our professors consciously tried to validate each one of our different opinions...learning is lost when someone is afraid to speak up and say, 'Actually, I felt the exact opposite.' They're afraid that, that might be the wrong answer.

Keeping a learning journal was an ongoing assignment for students in the academy for leadership and learning. As it turned out, it became an asset to learning in the sessions dedicated to RDE. As the students wrote their reflections about their experiences with resiliency education, it was enlightening for them to see how they were beginning to internalize their learning and how they intended to make adjustments in their attitudes or behaviors. In addition, the sense of trust that had begun to develop with the professor during class, forged to an even deeper level as the professor read and reacted to their journal entries. Mary wrote about her experience with journaling:

I think putting it down on paper is a major step...this is personal, but I put down everything that my dad did to me growing up. I had a big long list, and I was like, "ok, so, you have to look at it [the list of wrongs] and say, 'ok, am I gonna be stuck with this, for the rest of my life, or can I move on with it?'" Being able to put it into a journal, into kind of a story of your life...and what was going on in your life now was a big thing. You kinda knew that it wasn't gonna be shared with the rest of the community, it was just for that one professor that you were working with...that was a huge thing to be able to communicate with her, and to share your experiences.

Once the relationships had developed, though the class came to an end, the trusting relationship continued. During the following semester, Andrea had a class with one of the faculty from the academy and discovered that the caring relationship she had developed with that professor endured, even to a large lecture hall:

Now I have a class with the professor who led my cloverleaf, and it's a lecture class of like 300, and she can pick Carla and me out of the entire group...we have a personal connection...for the teachers to actually know my name, know some of my story, and where I'm coming from in my personality...is so much easier for us to get on different levels.

In our society where fear lurks on a multitude of levels, the intimacy of the close atmosphere created not only a sense of trust but also a safe place to share many of the issues that post-secondary students face daily. As Laura found, having a place to share your problems, be it with peers or with caring adults, brought a sense of security by knowing that what is shared is confidential and safe:

I think it's definitely helped because, I mean, it helps me get to know people...it's kind of a security of knowing that I have someone that I can go to for help or something...it's just nice having that security there.

Simply put, Adam encompassed with his summary the feeling of most of the participants:

"The most meaningful part of this semester really...was the relationships that I built."

High expectations

In the realm of academics, it is imperative that expectations be identified and communicated to students. In the RDE sessions a variety of expectations existed, however different from other academic spheres in which these freshmen students attended regularly. The expectations of these sessions did not involve reading a myriad of textbooks, taking copious notes, or regurgitating information in the form of essays and term papers. Instead, the expectations of this class were a moderate number of written assignments, weekly entries in a learning journal, and practicing and recording skills of resilient behavior and attitudes learned in class each week. However, as the participants reflected upon the meaning they made as a result of the expectations, I discovered that the interpretation and benefit of the expectations enhanced their understanding and eventual internalization of resiliency.

At first the students were unsure of the expectations that seemed in some ways quite subjective when compared with other classes. However, they soon began to see that even though the expectations were different, they were not any less demanding as Mary articulated in her interview:

It wasn't an ordinary class where you have to know this material for the test...this is kinda like real life thinking, how you have to rearrange stuff, and get through life with it...it was hard work.

Carla initially felt that this class would be an easy credit, but as the type of expectations were being outlined, she recognized that the class held an opportunity for life changing growth, if she would choose to have it:

When [the facilitator] told us on the first day that it wasn't a test-based class, something immediately went off in my mind; I don't need to sit here and take notes and study, and just try to memorize...a different part of my brain was like... 'Wait, like this isn't high school anymore, where you just pass physics

and you never have to look at it again, this is what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life.

In some sense there were two levels of expectations, one seemed to be internal and one external. The students experienced go 'rounds each session, a time when individuals, one at a time, would respond to a specific question, statement, or thought. There was freedom to pass, but at the end of the round, the facilitator would return to hear some sort of answer or reaction. The other mode of expectation was internal and required the student to put time into thinking about concepts or ideas that had been experienced or discussed in class. There was challenge for either mode of expectation, often depending upon the personality type of the student. Karen expressed a dichotomous view of the expectations throughout the sessions:

Were there high expectations? Yes, to participate, with what really goes on in your life or whatever, but nothing to say the right answer, or anything like that. [The expectations came] more in the way that I got to practice it...so it definitely helped me be aware of what I was doing.

Since Karen would consider herself an introvert, she struggled with expressing her thoughts and feelings, especially externally to others:

As much as I didn't like it when they made us participate...as an introvert, I don't always like sharing what I really feel, but it was definitely comfortable enough that when I wanted to share something, I could definitely say what I wanted to or how I really felt.

When professors expect quality work from students, it usually comes in the form of reports, presentations, or exams. However, in this class, the emphasis rested upon thinking about their learning. The facilitators constantly encouraged the students to think about their learning, and then to write about it in their journal as well as practice the skills acquired in their everyday life. In that way, it was hoped that resiliency would become internalized and

habitual in the way they would react to challenges or adversity. Carla had much to say about the experience:

I just know that when one of the facilitators would say like, “You need to write it down or bring it to class even though you might not turn it in,” ...that does say something about the accountability of more than just what’s on paper. [The facilitators] continually said the important part is the thinking behind it, not just writing it down, but thinking...

As Elaine found, learning resiliency in a community of learners reinforced accountability for expectations that were more subjective than objective: *“I think it did help, like the discussions...a small group setting requires you to be more accountable, and actually talk about your thinking and your learning, and like what you’ve applied.”*

The expectations may have been different from those for other classes these students had taken, however, they were still responsible for their learning and ultimately accountable to themselves and their sense of resiliency. Carla came to terms with her determination to risk vulnerability as she decided to make her journal entries quite personal:

I really did want to learn, and so it was just like ‘I’m gonna take that risk’ It turned out to be a great risk taken because I got so much feedback and encouragement on things that I wasn’t sure, like, ‘Will she understand how I’m feeling here?’ And then I’d get my journal back the next week, and it would say, “You know, I totally see what you’re saying. That’s a great insight.” Every time I got something like that, it encouraged me all the more to be all the more honest.

As the interviews concluded, Laura made an observation that provided a summary reflecting the mutual hope of the facilitators as well as the students:

I knew they had the high expectations, and so, from the beginning I tried to focus on it and put my thoughts out there so that I could contribute to learning and stuff...it kinda grew on me and I realized, ‘Hey, this is a pretty cool thing,’ and so it made me wanna learn more about it. After about the first week it really wasn’t so much forced learning, it was, hopeful learning....which I would define as, learning for yourself. The hope that you can better yourself.

Opportunity to participate or contribute

When students are given the opportunity to participate or contribute in some important way, it often fulfills the innate need that human beings have to belong. Participating or contributing gives voice to one's beliefs and feelings as well as empowers them to stretch in critical thinking and decision making about issues in life (Benard, 2004).

While learning in community, the students gradually built a comfort level that allowed them not only to trust those with whom they shared their thoughts and feelings, but empowered them with a sense of courage, allowing them the freedom to participate and contribute in a variety of ways, as Carla expressed enthusiastically:

I think that once I warmed up to the class I had to remind myself to keep my hand down a lot of times. If I know something, I wanna shout it out to the world and be like, "I know this," and so in order to let other people talk...But yeah, participating was great!

Participating is almost always a revolving door of learning, if we allow it. Many of the participants voiced the benefit they gained from expressing their thoughts and then receiving the feedback from their peers. Andrea expounded on her thoughts as she explained what she gained by her willingness to be vulnerable as she shared in class:

When learning about things, participating definitely helps. I don't enjoy asking questions, but when I know that I need to learn more or want to learn more, I have to step outside of my comfort zone and ask questions, even though that's not my thing. But, I am more willing to participate in a classroom setting [like this] ... I mean, just the small feeling of it and knowing everyone in the class makes all the difference in being able to learn about myself... is a big deal.

Perhaps Andrea discovered the ultimate experience of contributing when she gathered insight into extending her understanding for the good of others: "Then, just to know that other

people learn from your experiences...of course, I learn from other people's experiences. I think it's a really cool environment."

Not only did I observe the students' flexibility as a result of their opportunity to participate and contribute in the community of learners, I also sensed a respect flourishing amongst the students. Mary also discovered its presence as the willingness to share became more evident: *"By being willing to share with each other, you kinda gained your respect for everyone, so you kinda really did become a community."* Karen noted that, for her, the freedom from being judged made her experience so much more comfortable: *"...they [teachers and students] were just open to anything you had to say...so you could relax and be comfortable and really say what you wanted to without being afraid of being judged."*

Kelli expressed the essence of being able to contribute or participate meaningfully whether in a class setting or in life:

For me at least, I felt more comfortable, I guess, because I was actually doing something for myself and it wasn't to impress other people, so I could say what I thought. I think that makes people better. It should make them feel better on the inside just because they're actually being themselves out loud ...You're obviously not gonna get like respect all the time, but at least you can know how you feel to get...like the truth out.

Discussion

Research has contended that every human has the potential to develop resilient attitudes and characteristics (Benard, 2004). This study attested to the findings in the literature as to the importance of an environment that included caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to contribute or participate in building resiliency within students (Benard, 1993, 2004; Glenn & Nelson, 1988; Krovetz, 1999). However, it was not only the instruction on resiliency during the RDE sessions that made a difference in the

learning; what seemed equally influential was the experience of learning the subject matter of resiliency through a community setting. This was intentional to the makeup of the class and, as it turned out, an indispensable component to the effectiveness of RDE.

The concept of learning in community assists post-secondary educators in engaging students in traditional structures of learning where the focus is on “know what” and “know why” knowledge (Wiersema, 2006, p. 6). According to Webster, a community can be defined as a unified body of individuals, people with common interests living in a particular area, or an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location. Peck (1987) described community as “a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment...” (p. 59). These vital signs of a community were prevalent in the class structure in which the resiliency sessions were taught. Learning in a social environment provides a more conducive atmosphere for learning which nurtures a more lasting memory of what is conceptualized (Goleman, 2006). John Dewey, a pioneer in education, too, believed that social interaction stimulates more learning than the silence found in traditional classrooms (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, (2004).

One of the components of the class included collaborative learning, which according to Hansen and Stephens (2000) emphasizes the virtue of active involvement. In a community where learners are active in the learning process versus a lecture style classroom, the students take initiative to become active participants rather than passively absorbing the information. As active participants, the “learners become inspired to associate that pleasurable, engaging activity with the content to be learned. When that happens, some wonderfully useful connections will become a permanent part of their brains’ wiring” (Leamson, 2000, p. 40).

As the participants in this community of learners became more involved with the learning of resiliency, they expressed the desire that it would become a life-long part of their response to the challenges and adversity they would encounter in the future.

Through active listening, personal sharing, and responding to written assignments, facilitators and faculty became mutual learners with the students. These group leaders allowed themselves to become an intrinsic part of the community, stimulating a learning environment that promoted caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to contribute and participate. The participants in the RDE sessions acknowledged that learning from each other's attitudes and experiences broadened and deepened their understanding of resiliency. By seeing the concepts of resiliency through the experiences of others, they gained not only a wider spectrum of resiliency behaviors and attitudes, but also a perspective on how one can survive challenges in a positive and productive manner.

Conclusion

Community offers a safe place...where one can feel valued and appreciated (Peck, 1987). Students, beginning their freshmen year of college have often just left a family and a community who has nurtured their growth. In institutions of higher learning, we must continue to stimulate their development in new and effective ways, connecting them to a community of learning where they can benefit from caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute.

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CHAPTER 6. RESILIENCY DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION: TRANSFORMATIONAL POSSIBILITIES FOR POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

by Kristine M. Meyer

A paper submitted to *Higher Education in Review*

“You have seen what might be, now go and make it so.”
The Spyglass (Richard Paul Evans, 2000)

Abstract

Post-secondary education students will experience transitions, successes, challenges, and adversities during their college years. Although they will continue their growth and development in many aspects of their lives during this time, perhaps a most critical, but often ignored, attribute for them to develop is resiliency. This article examined the findings from a phenomenological study of 11 students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) during their first semester. The data confirmed the emergence of five stages of transformation: awareness, self-evaluation, practice, change, and extension. This transformation was observed as the students gained a deeper understanding of resiliency, and enhanced the choices and behaviors characteristic of resilient individuals, increasing their chances for success.

Introduction

The transition to post-secondary education is a time of high vulnerability, especially for students who, for the first time, are leaving the security of high school and home (Kegan, 1982). These vulnerabilities can render students unable to cope with adversity, and other significant challenges in their lives, thus influencing their academic success. The resilient student, the one more “able to bounce back” from adversity or other challenges (Benard

1993, p. 44), is likely to be more successful. Therefore, RDE may be one way to impact success.

We have much to learn about helping students develop in order to become more resilient but, perhaps, we need to begin to take what we know and put it into more intentional actions within our educational institutions. Research has provided an understanding of what describes the attributes young people need in order to be resilient (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). In social terms, resiliency is defined as “the ability to bounce back” (Benard, 1993, p. 44), or “to recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune” (Pulley & Wakefield, 2001, p. 7). Researchers have identified characteristics that can be found in resilient people (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Benard (1993, 2004) identified four personal attributes (i.e., protective factors) which seem to encompass many of the traits recognized in other studies about resiliency. According to Bernard’s research, the most common protective factors found in resilient people are: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose.

The qualities exemplifying social competence include: responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor. Socially competent people have the ability to develop relationships with family and friends both at school and in the community. A person with problem-solving skills demonstrates the ability to think abstractly and reflectively as well as see alternate solutions to problems both cognitive and social. These skills are augmented with the ability to plan, think creatively, and utilize resources. Having a sense of identity is indicative of a person’s autonomy. An autonomous person is able to think and act independently, and seek a sense of control over his/her environment.

Autonomous people are able to separate themselves from dysfunctional family environments. A sense of purpose is often seen in one who has goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future.

Transformational development is a continual and complex process (Baxter Magolda, 1999). Educators at the post-secondary level are doing many things to facilitate learning. However, it appears there is missing a way to develop meaningful connections between the diverse academic and social experiences of college life (Brown, 2004). RDE has the potential to provide intentional direction in student development that can impart the needed connections necessary for academic and social success. This study explored students' perceptions of their experiences in RDE that affected their acquisition of protective factors and ultimately led to a positive transformation of behaviors and attitudes.

Background of the Study

It was during a meeting of the Academic Standards Committee, at a midsized Midwestern research university, that discussion began focusing on concerns raised when reviewing written requests by students to be reinstated after a period of dismissal from the university for lack of satisfactory academic progress. Committee members observed a repeated pattern among students who had been dismissed. More often than not, they found students responding to adverse situations in their lives with devastation and an inability to grasp perspective. The issues seemed to raise barriers and would result in poor class attendance, missed assignments, poor workmanship, and often dropping out of the class. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that the students had not developed any productive strategies to address life challenges. The insight into this perplexing trend prompted one of

the committee members to suggest resiliency education for beginning postsecondary students.

Research supports the premise that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993, 2004; Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Therefore, a learning component about resiliency development for postsecondary students would contain opportunities to understand, internalize, and “try out” resiliency. The ultimate goal of RDE would be to enable students to internalize the nature of resilient behaviors and characteristics as well as increase their response choices in the face of difficult life challenges.

Understanding the student experiences and perceptions after exposure to RDE could lead to tactical undertakings in resiliency education at the college level that have the potential to greatly impact retention. Therefore, this RDE project explored how to encourage students to rise above those adverse situations and work through them in a healthy, productive manner. In essence, I was curious as to how I could help students to grow into resilient young adults through intentional instruction. The project then, would encompass a curriculum that would be actualized in a classroom setting.

Part of the curriculum was implemented in a freshman class through leadership and learning academy at a Midwestern university. The academy offers two semester-long courses. The first course, which included the sessions on resiliency, is designed with an emphasis on: (a) learning about learning; (b) learning about self; (c) purposefully developing community; (d) deliberately practicing and refining skills to support and encourage the growth of self and others; (e) practicing metacognition; and (f) engaging in intentional mental processing. In addition to affording plenty of individual talk time, two and one-half hour weekly meetings provide opportunities for students to participate in frequent team

learning. Consistent with the goal of helping students manage, and control their own growth and development while supporting the learning of their colleagues, the team learning opportunities are centered around the science of learning along with the deliberate development of community.

Four sessions of RDE were taught to 47 first semester freshmen facilitated by a lead professor and four supporting faculty. During the RDE sessions, I participated as a co-facilitator. The curriculum was designed as a tool to engage students in the awareness and development of resiliency. Each session involved a variety of activities and learning components focused on internalizing an understanding of resiliency as well as an opportunity for a self-discovery of protective factors. There were continual checks for understanding, and opportunity to reflect and share about the learning experience.

While conducting the sessions, the co-facilitators and participating faculty began to notice significant changes in many of the students. It was as if they were practicing new behaviors, deeply reflecting upon what they had learned in the sessions on resiliency, connecting past and present situations, and applying their new understandings in their lives with new awareness. For example, some of the students began sharing moments they handled differently using various tools learned in class, such as reframing and self-talk. They became more confident in expressing the protective factors they had identified in themselves and how they have used or plan to use them to address challenges or adversity. As the co-facilitators and faculty listened to and observed the students in class, it became evident that there were a number of students who really had made their own meaning of resiliency and were beginning to make important connections to their lives as college students. I believed it was important to ascertain from the students what meaning they made of the phenomenon of becoming

more resilient. An email was sent to 20 students, so identified, describing the study and requesting their participation. Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Making meaning of resiliency in their lives was ultimately up to the students. My goal in this study was to identify reasons for changes in students' behaviors and reveal important factors affecting the development of individual resiliency.

Methodology

In light of the various factors affecting transition and adjustment of the freshman student to the college experience, it was prudent to explore how these young adults made meaning of resiliency, the ability to deal effectively with challenges, in their lives. The following describes the methodological framework used to conduct this phenomenological study. I begin with the theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Epistemology

Exploring epistemology gives researchers an opportunity to wander in the charted areas of the philosophical underpinnings that explain how we know what we know. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), epistemology refers to the assumptions one makes about the process of gathering knowledge. Constructionism, which informed this study, is an epistemological lens which views knowledge and "all meaningful reality as such, as contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context"

(Crotty, 2003, p. 42). Meaning is constructed in relationship to something, it is not discovered, but constructed (Crotty, 2003).

Theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective that supported the methodology for this study can be found in the interpretivist philosophy. The ontology of the constructionist-interpretivist is that there are multiple valid and socially constructed realities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Therefore, the multiple realities of the lived experience can be interpreted for meaning through the lens of perception. We can only construct meaning from what we perceive in the present, our current reality, with the knowledge we have embodied and gathered in the past.

The curriculum for the resiliency development component was designed with the intent to introduce the protective factors of resiliency to the students. Through the teaching process, the intent was to help students identify and enhance their existing protective factors as well as learn how to bring new strengths into being. For this to become a reality, it was necessary for the students to take the new knowledge and combine it with what they knew of themselves as they began the process of constructing new meaning in terms of resiliency.

Methodology

The methodological approach of phenomenology was deemed appropriate for this study as we discerned the “essence” of the experience as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15). Phenomenology seeks to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of our theoretical activities not only in describing the essences, but also through grasping roots in the ordinary lived experience. The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, believed that the phenomenological philosophy is essentially the description of the “perception” of the

perceived world (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). In *The primacy of perception and other essays*, Merleau-Ponty (1964) reiterated: “The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (p. 13). Merleau-Ponty believed that describing the perception was primary for phenomenology. By looking at our ordinary engagement with the world from a bit of distance, we gain clearer insight and understanding, just as we might by holding a book a little way from our eyes in order to read better (Matthews, 2002, p. 35). As the students described their experience with RDE, the very act of putting their perceptions into language simulated the “stepping back” which elucidated, for them, the essence of the experience.

The heart of phenomenology, which informed this study, is the lived experience (Merriam, 2002). Phenomenology brings into relationship the conscious subject and the object (Crotty, 2003), in this case the student and the notion of resiliency. As researchers, it is important that our focus is not on the humans or on the human world but, rather, on “the essence of the meaning of the interaction” (Merriam, 2002, p. 93). The phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, conceived phenomenological philosophy as “re-learning to look at the world” (Matthews, 2002, p. 46). The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of the students’ experiences of “re-learning to look at the world” after the encounter with RDE. Phenomenology was appropriate for this study as I sought to discern the “essence” of the experiences as described by the students (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Methods

Epoche process

The phenomenological approach to the process known as epoche is that of bracketing, or setting aside, preconceived notions, ideas, or theories concerning the present study in order to eliminate as much bias as possible (Moustakas, 1995). This enables the researcher to come to the data with an open mind.

At the onset of the study, it was necessary to highlight the biases that were evident in my experience as a result of the years I have spent developing resiliency. It was, therefore, essential that I bracket my viewpoints and beliefs in order to prevent the assimilation of my thoughts into that of the participants. I diligently reflected continuously, through journaling and personal contemplation, my preconceptions and biases in connection to my understanding of resiliency. Pertinent to the study and the epoche process was the isolation of my previous beliefs, assumptions, and biases. I believe:

- It is possible for one to learn to be resilient.
- There are certain characteristics that can be found in resilient people such as intrapersonal skills, optimism, social competence, the skill of problem solving, and the ability to set goals and look forward to something in the future.
- People who are not resilient are not always suicidal or otherwise maladjusted.
- Resiliency is essential for fulfillment in life.
- Resiliency is seen in response to a plethora of challenges – large and small.
- Resiliency is an attitude that is reflected in behaviors, feelings, and beliefs.
- Resiliency brings responsibility to the forefront: that of choice, action, and thought.
- We can affect another's resiliency by providing a caring environment, and having healthy expectations and opportunities to be a part of and contribute to an organization or relationship.
- Knowing one's strengths contributes to one's resiliency.

Throughout the process of data collection, I reviewed this list in order to maintain my current focus on the lived experiences of the students.

Participants

The Midwestern university made available four sessions in a leadership and learning academy in which the curriculum for resiliency development was delivered. This two-credit class met weekly for two and a half hours. The class was comprised of 47 freshmen students from a variety of majors: animal ecology, business, diet and exercise, elementary education, exercise science, horticulture, physical therapy, and veterinary science. Qualitative research, steeped in a search for meaning necessitates selecting participants who can bring rich and meaningful data to the table. Since the “idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants...that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185), the participants for this study were purposefully selected. The participants were identified through a set of sampling criteria that aligned with the purpose of the study. Through written assignments and observations, I purposefully chose to include students who indicated an interest in deeply understanding the protective factors, experimenting with the skills of resiliency (which included reframing and self-talk), showed a desire (through conversation and written assignments) to know more about the concept, and who seemed to have experienced the observed phenomenon of making meaning of resiliency in their lives after participating in RDE. Phenomenological studies emphasize an in-depth focus on the experience with the phenomenon and therefore tend to have smaller sample sizes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Eleven of the 20 identified students agreed to be a part of this study.

Among the 11 participants in the study there were nine females and two males; all were freshmen students between 18 and 19 years of age. Four of the participants were first

generation college students, and all were Caucasian and from the Midwest. There were a variety of academic undergraduate majors: three in animal ecology; two in horticulture; two in elementary education; one in exercise science and physical therapy; one in diet and exercise; one in business; and one in a pre-veterinary program.

Data collection

In order to gather rich and meaningful data, the goal of a phenomenological study, one of the principal methods used by researchers is the interview (Merriam, 2002), the “heart of social research” according to Esterberg (2002, p. 83). The most effective interviews are usually in-depth, semi-structured, and guided with open-ended questions. Since this type of interview is non-scripted, the data are described in the words of the participants, providing authentic insight and perspective (Esterberg, 2002). Data collection began with two focus group interviews; one group consisted of seven participants and the other had four. Two different sessions were held to accommodate the schedules of the participants. Each 45-minute session was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The focus group interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that afforded the participants ample opportunity to project whatever thoughts, experiences, and understandings they wished to share.

Face-to-face individual interviews were then conducted with each of the 11 participants. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Using the semi-structured format of the focus group, the participants had the opportunity to share personal meaning in reference to their experiences with the resiliency curriculum. In addition to the focus group and individual interviews, data were collected from the students’ journals, other assignments, and end-of-semester written summaries of their learning. Data were collected

until saturation of the sampling occurred, the point at which similar information began to be heard, observed, or read (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Data analysis and interpretation

Themes in phenomenology are the repeated thoughts or the description of experiences that highlight the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon becomes better understood as it is found, named, and amplified through the process of analysis (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). The process of analyzing the data for this study was formulated based on the steps described by Colaizzi (1978). At the start of the analysis, all transcripts and journal entries were carefully read in order to understand the essence of the students' written and oral reflections as well as to be mindful of reoccurring topics. After a coding procedure was developed, the transcripts and journal entries were read a second time using a color-coded system to highlight significant statements, repeated themes or concepts, duplicated descriptions and understandings, and similar meanings derived from the experiences with RDE. Rereading and sorting the coded statements enabled me to identify potential meanings from the data. Finally, themes that had emerged from the data were constructed and integrated to produce an exhaustive description (Colaizzi, 1978) of the students' experiences. Using that description as a basis, a statement of identification of the phenomenon's fundamental structure was articulated. The data were checked for validity by returning them to the participants for confirmation. These findings were validated in three ways: (a) taking themes back to the participants for feedback; (b) employing peer-debriefing; and (c) engaging in conversation with outside observers (Creswell, 2003).

Findings

The themes ubiquitous within this study were: the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling, the value of learning in community, and the transformative development of resiliency by post-secondary students. As perceived by the participants, the fundamental structure of becoming more resilient, was a self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners, and then intentionally applying the learning to their own lives. This complex statement is potent with potential options to explore for students and educators alike. However, this article addresses the transformative development that occurred within the participants as they made personal meaning of resiliency through application into their everyday lives.

The data attested to an emerging pattern of development described in five levels: (1) awareness; (2) self-evaluation; (3) practice; (4) change; and (5) extension. This pattern is unique to this study and not contrived from previous research. It was revealed as the students made meaning of their experiences with the resiliency development instruction and activities. Thus, this research has the potential to serve as a model for future studies in the area of resiliency in post-secondary education.

Awareness

The first stage in developing resiliency by the participants was *awareness* – of both self and of resiliency as a concept. In order to facilitate the exploration of the understanding of self, one of the cornerstones of student development (King & Baxter Magolda, 1996) and a key component to resilient behavior (Benard, 2004), we first wanted the participants to

understand the stories of their lives that brought them to this point. In this activity, entitled “My Life in a Bag,” the students shared stories around personal artifacts, which revealed something about who they were. The meaning that the students discovered through this experience highlighted the sessions and often propelled them to see who they were in a new light as Carla aptly expressed, “*Writing down on the piece of paper all of our experiences...this was an act of autonomy as a resiliency factor and was astounding for me to see how I’ve grown and shaped as a person.*”

With a sense of self-awareness, we moved into a more in-depth explanation of resiliency and its components of behavior and personal characteristics. Through a variety of activities and learning techniques, we defined resiliency as the ability to “bounce back” from challenges or adversity (Benard 1993, 2004). The students learned the function of each of the four protective factors of resiliency (i.e., social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and knowing one’s purpose) as outlined by Benard (1993, 2004), identifying which factors were strongest in their personality spectrums. Allison enthusiastically described her feelings of her encounter with the new information:

I like being aware of it [resiliency information]; I think it’s helped me a lot...the practical application...I didn’t realize how much that I used it and now that I’m more aware of it, I use it a little bit more every day.

It was often an enlightening experience as the students discovered that the concept was not as complex as they expected but, rather, something that may have been within them all along.

As educators, it was thrilling to see the proverbial light bulbs go on in the minds of the students as they became aware of the possibilities resiliency could have in their lives.

Karen thoughtfully expounded on the meaning it had for her:

First I learned what resiliency was...and then, just learning that it was an option for your life... you don't have to carry all that; you can learn how to bounce back from stuff! You're not stuck in a corner; you have places to go.

As the sense of awareness began to permeate students' understandings of resiliency, the students slowly began to identify it with their past experiences and project it on to future experiences, as Laura described:

I didn't know a lot about resiliency to start off with; but this last semester I learned what it really means; it was a rough semester for me, and so, learning about it really helped me get through it and everything.

Allison also saw the options for confronting with her situations:

I have learned several new skills, including how to handle stress better, learn more efficiently, and work with people. Resiliency was one of the most important things I learned about this semester.

It was interesting and gratifying to hear how resiliency awareness became such a significant understanding in their lives as students. In the individual interview with Andrea, she suggested just how important this learning is for students:

I think the topics such as the protective factors, self-talk, and resiliency are so very important, it should almost be required for students to go through some sort of course involving them. It is probably one of the most valuable things students will ever learn while here at this university.

As the students grew in their awareness, they exhibited attitudes that seemed to exude a sense of hope. Laura resonated with this insight during her interview, *“Just kind of knowing that there is a way to overcome stuff, and...there is hope of overcoming the problems and the stress that I was going through.”*

Self-evaluation

The second stage emerged as we observed the students becoming cognizant of their ability to *self-evaluate*. As students revealed their experiences while learning the constructs

of resiliency, it became apparent that they were able to do so as a result of an inner journey to discover why they think, react, and feel the way they do as well as how their identity affects the way they respond to the issues they face in life.

Because I initiated the sessions on resiliency development by delving into a deeper understanding of the self through the self-story exploration, the students were able to uncover new insights into their identity as highlighted by Andrea:

Activities such as “My Life in a Bag” are so cool because it gives people the chance to really look in the mirror and see what is important to them and to some extent it can help people reprioritize.

Carla examined her relationships with friends and discovered new understanding of her autonomy:

I never could really connect with my friends on certain levels because they were so into the magazines and what clothes they wanted, what they wanted to look like...but now, seeing how autonomy really had a huge role to play in that...

The activities and assignments in the curriculum surrounding the resiliency development sessions encouraged students to “think about their thinking” in order to develop the habit of examining all aspects of thought concerning identity, response, and character.

During the focus group session, Andrea conveyed the depth of her thinking in her understanding of the protective factors of resiliency:

I’ve always been told, by other people that I know a lot about where I want to be in my morals and that kind of thing... but [now] I actually understand that not a lot of kids or students at this age know that much about themselves. Just time to myself and the thinking time that I have, has really given me that protective factor of knowing myself.

Andrea continued by disclosing several personally devastating experiences from the previous year—the deaths of six people who were very important to her. She explained how

those experiences shaped her perception of the cliché, “something good can always come from the bad”:

...unfortunately, there's been a lot of suicides in my family and you can't really put a positive thing on it, it just sucks... you can't say like, 'Well, it's ok because ...', it's not, but it could be so much worse, and in a sense, that's a positive. I've always thought I was at rock bottom, and then something else comes in the rock bottom, you know? What I thought was rock bottom was not rock bottom, and I don't think there ever will be a rock bottom. Something can always be worse, and if that's the positive thing that you need to gain out of things...I just think those types of things can make you, can make me so much stronger.

A fascinating result of Andrea's disclosure came during the individual interview with Mary. Reflecting on the incredible resiliency of Andrea, Mary responded with awe at the strength and ability Andrea displayed as she went on with her life. Even though Mary had been through extremely difficult circumstances in her childhood, her ability to see Andrea as a role model exemplifies her understanding of her own resiliency:

Just looking at the situation and knowing again, that it could be a lot worse...in my life. I had a terrible childhood, so that makes me look at how I want to shape my future, so I know my kids don't have to go through the stress that I had to go through because of my parents and their mess-ups. I think just looking ahead in the future and how you want to live.... I can't even imagine six funerals so it's like, 'Ok, I thought I was resilient, and she [Andrea] is the brightest, bubbly person I have ever met!' Picturing her on the street, meeting her on the street, I would never imagine...she is very resilient, she knows how to get what she wants, she knows how to look at it, she knows how to reframe it, and she's doing well.

Revisiting unpleasant memories was not always easy, but often worthwhile, as Mary continued in her journal:

Most of my stories that I wrote had the feeling of anger and sadness tied to them. I was put in the middle of a lot of my parents' fights and was let down a lot. I know what it feels like and know that I will not put my own children through the same thing. Situations that have gone on between my parents will always stay with me. I will never ever forget them. They have changed who I am today.

By reflecting about past experiences, the participants discovered personal meaning by making connections to what they were learning about resiliency. Often, a sense of appreciation for the learning or growth replaced the resentment and tamed the anger for having to endure emotional pain. Mary was eventually able to put a positive frame around her past:

In a way, I'm kind of glad they [the painful experiences] occurred because I feel they made me more mature and able to handle a lot more for my age. A person who is resilient has buoyancy and adaptation in their lifestyle. I feel that I have some of these characteristics in my life. Resiliency has truly taken on a new meaning for me.

Resiliency occurs when one is able to view those experiences as fertile ground for personal growth. In her journal, Andrea described how she has come to understand her strength or resiliency by looking at the hardships faced in her past:

In almost every case I can trace my "strength" or "resiliency" to my past experiences. It's unfortunate, but true, that the majority of my past experiences that have helped to develop my resiliency were bad or sad experiences. As much as my experiences stunk, it's cool to look back on them and see that they've helped me grow into a better person...they've repeatedly taught me and shown me that life continues even during hard times, and after these hard times, it's so important to gather yourself and essentially bounce back despite the hardship.

Examining and evaluating one's resiliency takes concentrated effort. Through the students' behaviors and attitudes, journal entries, and semester summaries, we observed evidence of growth in the area of self-evaluation, which is a stepping-stone on the pathway to resiliency. Carla summed up many aspects surrounding the impact that self-evaluation has on internalizing one's resiliency:

Resiliency is recognizing that although it may feel like it's the end of the world right now, I am willing to shape up and admit it is not...sometimes I want to wallow, but I show resilience when I maturely pick myself up and move forward.

Practice

The third stage that emerged as we observed the students integrating the concepts of resiliency into their everyday lives was that of *practice*. As college students develop and mature, skills emerge incrementally during the college years, with practice, feedback, and exposure to good models” (King & Baxter Magolda, 1996, p. 167). Within the curriculum, opportunities for practice were built into each session as well as the assignments to be completed during the week. Carla recognized the importance of practice in her own experience:

I know resiliency is a good thing; it's just not natural for me yet. So I guess that's my challenge, to keep working at it in order to make it a natural habit...to practice the skills I've learned in order to make them a habit for life.

As Karen found, when the students were given the opportunity to practice the tools in the classroom setting and as part of the assignments between sessions, they were more likely to find the courage and ability to adapt them to their everyday lives:

Especially if you practice it, like when we were doing examples, I was thinking in my head of how this relates to my life, and then, it's so much easier, "ok, I can actually apply this to my life." And especially when it does make your life better, that's when it really sticks with you.

The data were rich with examples of intentional practice in which the participants used the basic understanding of the four protective factors, and the tools of self-talk and reframing, to create habits of resilient behavior.

Autonomy

As explained previously, having a sense of identity is a hallmark of autonomy. At first it was difficult for some to grasp the meaning of autonomy, but, once it was internalized, the students could relate and identify with the importance of it in their lives. Through Andrea's example in her journal entry, we saw how autonomy was being understood and applied:

I've been paying close attention to situations in my life, how they affect me, and how I apply what we're learning in class to work through them. Over the course of the past couple of days I've had to use my protective factors a lot! I knew going off to college would cause change in everyone's life, but a lot more change has occurred within my [high school] friends than I had planned...this weekend has been really hard being around them because not all of them have changed for the better. But, thanks to this class, and what we're learning, I was able to take a step back, re-examine the situation and, through autonomy, I refocused the situation and therefore made it through the weekend without complete despair.

Social competence

The ability to form and maintain good relationships is often associated with social competence. Allison latched on to a simple and practical way of practicing this protective factor in her daily life:

I have also learned just how much effect using a person's name when talking to them can have. People are much more responsive when you use their names throughout a conversation or in email greetings.

Social competence was not a natural skill for everyone in the class. For some it was something that required a conscious effort. Although Andrea lacked social aptitude, she did not lack determination to improve her ability in that area:

I am the type of person who needs to focus on social competence skills and work on forming strong relationships filled with trust...I have definitely seen

improvement on my social skills...I'd like to work more on kindness and empathy; these two areas I struggle with and I hope to improve upon.

Sense of purpose

Having a sense of purpose not only includes vocation, but also goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, and a sense of a bright future (Benard, 2004). With a fresh sense of independence and dreams for the future, the students seemed to resonate with this protective factor. Allison recalled her experience with the activities, surrounding the classroom practice with the sense of purpose:

Whenever I am having a tough time with a course, I use the sense of purpose protective factor and remember my long-term goals... it might be rough now, but this is putting me one step closer to my dreams. Keeping things in perspective like this definitely helps me to bounce back from rough times.

Problem-solving skills

Of the four protective factors, problem-solving skills was least addressed by the participants. Possible explanations for this include: (a) little class time was devoted to problem-solving techniques because only part of the curriculum was used in these four sessions, and (b) new to the freshmen experience, the students had not faced enough problems for practice. When people exhibit problem-solving skills, they most often demonstrate the ability to think abstractly and reflectively. Alternate solutions can be visualized to quell problems both cognitively and socially. Kelli was able to assimilate problem solving to her present attitude toward class attendance:

All semester I tended to...sleep in instead of going to my 10:00 class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I [felt] that I didn't need to go because it was just lecture. My ways...can change, though, 10:00 isn't early compared to some other classes that people have. I also knew that not going to class has

reflected on my grade. I am going to become more resilient by going to bed earlier the night before so I can wake up for lecture.

Reframing enables one to look at a situation in a new way, to consciously adjust perspective while experiencing a stressful or difficult situation in order to navigate through the circumstance with a hopeful attitude. Self-talk often complements reframing as the silent encourager, giving phrases to repeat in order to combat old beliefs. Laura reflected upon the result of consciously practicing reframing in her daily life:

I think everyone uses reframing or self-talk in some way in our life without even knowing it, but when you actually consciously think about it and make an effort to step back, look at a situation and think, “is this really as big as I’m making it, or is it just something really small?” ...that’s helped a lot.

When the students found that using the tools of reframing and self-talk in a natural setting could impact the outcome of a situation, the skills took on a deeper and more pertinent meaning. In her journal entry, Allison struggled with stress because of the high expectations she set for herself, but found help in reframing and self-talk:

Learning about resiliency has helped me tremendously in learning how to handle stress. Some things can really get me down, but learning more about resiliency has helped me overcome my hurdles. For example, I really did not do as well on my chemistry test that I thought I had and I was super upset about it. But I thought about it more and used reframing... study more from the exams for the final...[remember] some of my lower scores will be dropped.

Allison embraced her profound experience with reframing and self-talk by keeping a journal, reframing her day into a more positive light.

I try and keep a journal where I write down the five good things that happened that day and one bad thing, and only one bad thing. Then it really helps you remember, “Ok, my life really isn’t that bad; look at all the good stuff that happened.”

The data attested to the fact that the practice of reframing and self-talk can impact any number of issues at any level from grades, tests, to the trauma of death.

Change

In his book, *Changing minds*, the noted psychologist, Howard Gardner (2006) noted that there is a difference between “deepening of mind,” which happens as one learns about a subject or improves a skill-set, and “genuine transformation of mind” (p. xi), in which a person changes course as a result of new knowledge or skills. As mentioned previously, the students became aware of the presence of resiliency, and by putting a name on something that they could detect in their lives already, they were propelled to look further at the possibility of infusing it into their lives for the long-term. Mary found this particularly evident by examining her past and then seeing it in the light of resiliency: “*[It’s] just making yourself who you are and who you want to become. Putting a name on to it just made a lot more sense to me.*”

We trust that through time, the changes the students made would become enmeshed in their attitudes and behavior, and that a true transformational change will persevere throughout their lives. Allison pointed out her feelings about a permanent change:

The resiliency section has actually been the one thing from this course that has helped me the most in getting over hurdles this semester. I used to get really bogged down with schoolwork and get super stressed out. However, by using reframing, self-talk and my protective factors, I believe it will continue to be very useful throughout my college career and into my professional career.

Laura commented:

Learning about resiliency has been the biggest help ever. It has been a hard semester but...I will make it and now I know how to do that. Changing majors...I feel like life is unsettled right now, but I know I am a resilient

person, so I know I need to keep a positive attitude about it...I have learned so much!

In the story, *The Spyglass* (Evans, 2000), which we used in the sessions to illustrate the power of reframing and self-talk, the old man shared the spyglass with the king revealing what great potential the kingdom held. The old man told the king that, “Change requires work. But one must first see before doing” (p. 15). As we attempted to show the students the possibilities that acquiring resilient characteristics could make in their lives, they slowly began to take ownership of that vision, realizing, as the old man had said to the king, “Change requires work.”

Allison caught the message as she responded in her journal entry, *“It also made me think about how I could apply concepts from this class to the real world and it forced me to be responsible for this.”*

Kelli articulated the sense of responsibility that is necessary to enhance the change process even further:

I now am thinking of ways that I can continue being resilient. I know that I have changed a lot in the last year and I like to think it's for the better. I am a lot more positive thinking than I used to be. This class has given me more options and easier ways to be positive.

Just as work is a requirement for change to occur, perhaps a shift in perspective is also necessary. It could be that the old man’s wise words to the king in *The spyglass* (Evans, 2000), meant that “seeing” requires an adjustment in perspective. The participants in this study demonstrated, time and again, the power of perspective to induce change in their attitudes and behaviors. For example, Andrea highlighted her thoughts by sharing:

After so many traumatic events, you don't worry about the small things anymore. It just really helps put things in perspective...to me, resiliency is

bounding back from something hard, and when you have perspective, things aren't as hard as you think they are.

Donna made meaning of resiliency as she learned to adjust her perspective to the challenges she faced as a new college student:

I used to be a positive person all the time and then when I got here it just seemed like I hit a thousand brick walls and dimmed my outlook on life. Resiliency taught me that brick walls aren't supposed to stop you; you just have to learn to get over them.

She summed up her perspective of change, capping off one of the basic human values—our relationships with people:

The four protective factors have helped reduce my stress and put a little spring back in my step...I have learned to talk to my family more about how I'm feeling, and it really does make me feel better because I'm not carrying all that worry and stress on my shoulders.

Extension

Not everyone's strength is linked to the protective factor of social competence (Benard, 1993, 2004); however, neuroscience alludes that our brain is designed to be sociable (Goleman, 2006) as was evident in many of the participants of this study as they modeled an eagerness to take what they had learned and extend it to others in order to affect another's resiliency in a positive way. It was during the focus group interview that Adam expressed his desire to share what he had learned with people important in his life:

When we talk about resiliency, I'm not always just thinking about myself, I think about my roommate, my best friend, pretty much my other brother...when I come back to [the dorm] after class, I talk to him about what I learned... "this really reflects to you, not just me, you should really consider taking this class. It has really helped me and I haven't gone through half the stuff that you have like, my parents are still together and they're happy" ...[by sharing it] I learned more about resiliency itself.

Mary continued this thought: *In the future I hope to continue using the tools I have learned while in this class. I hope to continue to be resilient and...along the way, I want to share some of my experiences in this class.*

Our resiliency also has the potential to affect interactions with others. Carla made meaning of her own resiliency by seeing its impact upon her relationship with her sister:

I feel like I was a pretty flexible and resilient person, but I think what has really been brought to my attention is the way in which I react towards others that are struggling with resiliency...[like] my sister, who is the least resilient person I know. It [sessions on resiliency] really taught me...that my actions do not only affect myself, but they affect her, which affects my parents, which will affect like...it just really taught me the importance of not only helping myself as a person and handling situations, but also in helping others...

It was fascinating to observe the students not only extending their understanding of resiliency to others, but also transferring that willingness to help others learn. Mary articulated this purpose when she said, *“Mine was a sense of purpose also. Just trying to teach her [roommate] to be resilient and just kind of like bounce back from it...that’s my sense of purpose: being there for people.”* She continued:

Just trying to become who you are...if you stick in the past, that’s gonna rub off onto someone else, who’s gonna be like, “Oh, well, Mary does it, why can’t I?” So you kinda have a sense of purpose...to be that role model for someone else, or you can look at it where someone is depending on you...so you have a sense of purpose for that other person.

The data were rich with examples of students expressing the meaning they had made of resiliency education by their desire to bring it to others with the hope of affecting lives as theirs had been affected. Kelli aptly expressed, *“I will also be sure to help people in the same way I am helping myself. It’s not only good to make them feel better, but it makes me feel good to help someone out.”*

Discussion

Student development theorists King and Baxter Magolda (1996) contended “the process by which individuals attempt to make meaning of their experiences improves in a developmentally related fashion over time” (p. 166). As they mature, students become more skilled at interpreting various experiences in their lives. They grow in their ability to gather information, weigh its relevance, and assess their choice of response. Josselson (1996) maintained that, when constructing their identity, young people envision, consider, explore, and then choose their particular way of behaving and believing. Identity continues to be modified as students make developmental transitions and changes through adulthood.

Exploring the meaning students made through experiencing RDE validated for me the importance of bringing the concepts embodied in the curriculum to students embarking on their first experiences with college and independence. Carla articulated the potential impact this experience had on her life:

I know resiliency is a good thing; it's just not natural for me yet, so my challenge [is] to keep working at it in order to make it a natural habit. The power of positive thinking can change your life. I want to be resilient so I am going to try to practice the skills I've learned in order to make them a habit for life

As the literature on student development revealed, the process of making meaning of experience is linked to developmental phases and timing (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Throughout the sessions and data collection, I observed a glimpse of emerging developmental stages with the understanding and adoption of resilient behaviors and attitudes. I contend that, as these students continue to grow and mature, their ability to embrace the components of resiliency will also increase. The data attested to the participants' desire to make a life-long connection with their resilience. By intentionally placing the

students at the center of their own learning, they were compelled to take ownership of the process and the degree to which they espoused these changes.

Bridging the gap from experience to meaning invites complexity. Kegan (1992) proposed that meaning is made in the pocket between an event and a person's reaction to it. During that minute epoch, the person formulates a sense of meaning to attach to the event. Thus, the complexity begins in the construction of that meaning which is impressed by all the life experiences to that point, forming the individual's epistemic assumptions. Therefore, bridging that gap from experience to meaning "requires mutual reinforcements and dynamic relationship: students' current meaning-making shapes the supports that educators erect...[which] shapes how students continue the process of making meaning in their lives" (King & Baxter Magolda, 1996, p. 169).

Gardner (2006) introduced several factors involved in producing change in one's life. For one factor, he enlisted the understanding of four entities of mind change: stories, theories, concepts, and skills (p. 19). Throughout the sessions on resiliency, we immersed the students into the world of stories in order to provide a lens through which they could see more clearly the possibilities of resiliency in their lives. Theories and concepts of resiliency were discussed in detail as we explained the meaning of the protective factors. Skills of reframing and self-talk were introduced and practiced with the intent of exposing the students to the benefits of integrating resiliency into their daily interactions and responses to life's issues. Andrea's words reflected the significance of this experience:

The four protective factors really stuck out to me. I didn't know what autonomy was, but now I can relate it to myself through a lot of things. Things I do in life every single day have to do with the four protective factors, I just hadn't realized it. It's really good now to be able to sit down and say, "Hey, I need to do something about this. What can I do?"

Conclusion

Encouraging students to become resilient in the face of challenges and adversity should be a prime focus of institutions of learning because of its effect on student success (Braxton, 2004). The data supported my observations that the students were, indeed, making meaning of resiliency in their lives, and it was beginning to affect their behavior and attitudes in a positive way toward the challenges they faced as college students. Why, then, should we not expect that the meaning they made from their experiences with RDE will, indeed, continue to develop and impact their lives in some way for a long time?

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CHAPTER 7. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”
Viktor Frankl, 1984

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn how students at the post-secondary level made personal meaning of resiliency after participation in RDE. This research also sought to provide insight into the participants’ perceptions of four selected protective factors of resiliency: autonomy, problem-solving skills, a sense of purpose, and social competence. In addition, the study aspired to interpret how post-secondary freshmen made meaning and applied the skills of “reframing” and “self-talk” in relationship to resilient behaviors. With this understanding, the faculty and staff in colleges and universities can better equip their students to cope with the challenges and adverse situations they encounter.

General Conclusions

The themes that surfaced as I began the task of interpreting the data were: the effect of learning through story, illustration, and metaphor; learning in community, exemplified by caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to contribute or participate; and a developmental transition within the students demonstrated by becoming aware, self-evaluating, practicing, changing, and extending the learning to others. These findings were validated in three ways: (1) taking themes back to the participants for feedback; (2) employing peer-debriefing; and (3) engaging in conversation with outside observers (Creswell, 2003).

Data for this study were collected through journal entries, written assignments, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. The process of analyzing and interpretation adhered to that suggested by Colaizzi (1978), and involved reading the data, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing thematic clusters, integrating an exhaustive description, and formulating the unequivocal statement of identification depicting the phenomenon's fundamental structure.

As I initially began reading the data, I intentionally opened my mind to the meaning the students were making of their experience with RDE. It was imperative for the validity of the study that I allow the participant's voice to be heard, and not my assumptions or preconceived notions. By doing this, I was able to discover a theme that I had not anticipated. As mentioned earlier, I originally wrote the curriculum for RDE without including an emphasis on using stories or metaphors as a teaching tool, specifically because of my background as a storyteller. I wanted the curriculum to be generic enough so that any educator could use it effectively. However, the use of stories as pedagogy naturally evolved in the process of planning and teaching the sessions. During the interviews and through the data analysis of the journals and written assignments, it became apparent that the stories played a major role in making the concepts of resiliency more explicit and applicable in the lives of the participants. Via the medium of storytelling to present the various concepts embedded in RDE, the students made meaning by allowing the stories (be they illustrative or self-stories) to make deep and lasting connections to the information. Chapter 4 elucidates how the participants used the stories as a place to practice what they learned about resiliency and then apply it to their everyday lives.

The RDE sessions were conducted in a class for freshmen college students with an emphasis on leadership and learning. The class was originally structured so that it could function as a learning community with interaction focusing on leadership skills and critical thinking. Because of this design, it was not surprising that the data reflected the importance of learning the concepts of resiliency in the constructs of a community. The response of the participants supported the literature on the role of the environment in building resiliency in students by nurturing caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities to participate and contribute. The impact that learning resiliency in community can have on post-secondary students is discussed in Chapter 5.

Internal motivation for implementation into daily life was undeniably a part of the transformative perceptions of the participants. The students were encouraged to evaluate their thinking through every activity and assignment. This laid the foundation for a comprehensive understanding and discovery of their identities and individual strengths in relationship to resiliency. Phrases emerged in the data such as, *“I need to...I think about...It’s helped me...,”* suggesting action and motivation. As themes further emerged from the data, there was an indubitable presence of transformational development. These developmental strands seemed to identify themselves in five areas: awareness, self-evaluation, practice, change, and extension. The transformational developmental stages, how they surfaced, and their significance in the process of RDE, are described in Chapter 6.

As the data analysis continued, I found, through the process of triangulation, the participants to be in agreement with my interpretation of the themes found in the data. This enabled me to begin the exhaustive description of an unequivocal statement identifying the

fundamental structure of the phenomenon. Therefore, the fundamental structure of becoming more resilient, then, as perceived by the participants, is described as:

... self-recognized transformative development resulting from making personal meaning through stories and experiences within a community of learners, and then intentionally applying the learning to one's own life.

This statement involved thoroughly understanding the meaning made by these 11 participants through their experiences with RDE. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 reveal the importance of RDE by centering on three notions: the efficacy of learning resiliency through the pedagogy of storytelling, the value of learning resiliency in community, and the transformative resiliency development of the post-secondary student. However, their reflections concerning the effect of RDE on incorporating resiliency into their lives have given rise to further implications and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Offering Resiliency Development Education

Through the interview process, the participants shared feelings in respect to the personal impact made on them through their experiences with RDE. In addition, they provided recommendations to institutions of higher learning regarding the presence of RDE in student programming. One of the participants enthusiastically endorsed RDE saying, "*I think resiliency [education] should be required for all college students.*" Although the participants did not make any recommendations as to the content of the class, they often reflected their appreciation for the strides they had taken in their lives because of the type of learning and understanding that occurred. Adam expressed his gratitude, saying:

Thank you so much, this has been the most influential class I have taken in my life and I would like to be able to take more of these types of classes. I have learned so much about myself and I want to learn more!

As a point of introspection for life change, Andrea shared:

I am walking away from this class a better person because of the last four weeks focusing on life lessons and learning about tools that will help us not only as college students, but also as people in general. I think the topics such as the protective factors, self-talk, and resiliency, are so very important. It should almost be required for students to go through some sort of course involving them [factors of resiliency]. It is probably one of the most valuable things students will ever learn while here at [this university].

These personal introspections from the participants regarding the importance of teaching resiliency development are key. They indicate that a course such as RDE would provide invaluable training to all students.

Implications for Practice

The participants in this study were freshmen students out on their own for the first time, making their own decisions and, therefore, dealing independently with the consequences. The literature points out that, during this vulnerable time, influences that affect student retention and transition are: academic adjustment, social adjustment, and personal or emotional adjustment (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994, p. 282). As I reflected upon what was learned through this study of student experience and meaning making, I concluded that RDE has potential to address student transition, retention, and success. This notion gives rise to the need to further examine the impact that RDE can have on freshmen college students. Based upon the themes revealed through my research, the following implications have the potential to better prepare students at the post-secondary level to meet the challenges they will face as citizens and professionals.

Transformational development through RDE

The observations of the transformational development seen in the students gave me cause to believe that RDE had the potential to make a life-long effect on the students as they continued to grow and mature. The data attested to the idea that the students had a desire to personally incorporate the fundamental tenets of resiliency. When students were purposefully placed at the center of their own learning, it evoked a willingness to take ownership of the process and the degree to which they espoused the changes in attitude and behavior.

The observed stages of awareness, self-evaluation, practice, change, and extension, slowly emerged as the students deepened in their understanding and their ability to adapt the idea of resiliency to their life experiences. As they found personal meaning through the activities and assignments, the students took more initiative to engage in their learning and then transfer it to daily living. Allowing for the students' engagement with learning and subsequent transfer of information requires patience and perseverance on the part of the educator. When such transformation is seen, it is essential to our role as educators that we provide the opportunities for our students to purposefully develop resiliency behaviors and characteristics through the educational process. This may require incorporating it through such things as freshmen orientation or other programming focusing on transition or retention.

Stories as pedagogy

In reflecting upon the components that brought about eventual learning and transformation, it became evident that innovation in instructional practices, insight into student development, and passion for student learning are vital ingredients for making RDE successful. The students in this study were exposed to a wide variety of stories that

introduced different perspectives, insights, and choices with which each could respond to challenges or adversity in life. As mentioned previously, I have a background in storytelling, and, therefore, I intentionally designed the curriculum in a generic way, excluding the use of stories so that any educator could successfully teach it. However, the stories emerged through the planning process and eventually became a central pedagogical feature during the RDE sessions. As the stories took prominence in student learning, it became clear that their value in teaching resiliency could not be ignored. The power of using stories is an explicit implication to the instructional methods used at any level of education today.

The concept of resiliency is tacit knowledge; it is not a new or innovative idea. Using stories became the tool for discovering the presence of resiliency and the possibility of incorporating it into the behaviors and responses of the students. The printed word of a text limits, to an extent, the range of the information to be taught, whereas the story allows for freedom—connecting the listener to what has been, what is, and what might become—by the power of the images conjured in the imagination.

Employing stories as pedagogy can enhance the curriculum of any discipline. Their (stories) value as a methodology in teaching can be observed by student comprehension and transference of concepts learned. Some effective types of stories for educators to incorporate into teaching include illustrations, metaphors, and folklore. Teachers committed to adding stories as pedagogy can take the initiative to learn tips and techniques to increase their effectiveness.

The experience of the participants in this study reflects the importance of connecting information to academic learning in a meaningful way. It was evident that the participants responded to the power of the story in making sense and meaning of the resiliency

curriculum. Those who are entrusted with educating students have a responsibility to use the best tools available to enhance their learning. From the campfires of cave dwellers to present day office water coolers, people have gathered to share stories, therefore, it is natural that we use stories in the classroom. Teaching with stories enables academic material to be acquired by the learner with the secondary benefit of fostering a relationship between listener and teller, student and teacher. The gains made from utilizing storytelling as part of pedagogy are enormous.

RDE through community-based instruction

Another valuable asset found during the RDE sessions was that of the community environment, which provided a setting that richly enhanced the students' ability to make meaning of resiliency. In other words, the community built around learning and participating became an essential component of the depth to which the participants engaged with their learning. The community aspect was intentionally designed and nurtured by the facilitators and faculty.

Even prior to the RDE sessions, the participants developed into intentional members of the community, thus preparing them to explore resiliency on a personal level. By sharing thoughts and ideas with one another, they learned more about themselves as well as those around them. Upon hearing others express their feelings and beliefs in a community setting, the participants found they were able to adjust their own points of view. In large formal lecture halls, students are inhibited from interacting with professors as well as peers. When opportunities to gather diverse points of view are hindered, deep understanding, as was observed by these participants, is often diminished. Universities do not always have the

luxury of providing community-centered learning in all realms of academia; however, in light of the gains made by the participants in this study, it seems prudent that institutions of higher learning take every opportunity to provide community-oriented learning. These opportunities can be carved in a variety of ways, whether in a large or small class-size situation. The impetus resides in the commitment of the educator to seek innovative methods that will integrate community-style instruction.

Intentional community building to enhance student learning should be adapted into every classroom in every educational establishment. Changing the traditional structure to include more interactions can enable students to engage successfully in discussions, teaching them to provide evidence and justification for statements or beliefs. Encouraging students to take additional responsibility for their growth and development challenges them to think more deeply about their own thinking—to develop metacognition as a habit of mind (Wiersema, 2006). This augments a self-awareness that cascades into behaviors and characteristics representative of resiliency.

Learning communities provide a safe structure for faculty to change their work environment—to become empowered and to empower students, to shape their work and the work of students, and to develop relationships with colleagues who interact over meaningful issues in pursuit of more effective pedagogy (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004).

RDE training for educators

Providing educators with in-depth training to teach RDE curriculum or to incorporate the components of the curriculum into other disciplines will enable all students to benefit

from the skills and understandings promoted throughout the course. The RDE curriculum also has potential to become a part of a student's total learning and understanding throughout the college experience, becoming a way of life for not only student learning, but for the faculty teaching it as well.

Resiliency development for educators

Finally, as the students became engaged and excited about RDE, I became curious as to the effect of designing programming that would include components of RDE to enhance resiliency in educators. Teachers often become "burned-out" as a result of the pressures and issues they face today. One of the faculty remarked at the end of a session, "I wonder how my life would have been different if I had had this kind of information when I was their age." Both educators and students need skills and understanding to face challenges and adversity. These skills and tools can be acquired through resiliency training. The No Child Left Behind legislation represents a constant challenge that affects educators at the PK-12 level, and is one factor contributing to the lack of resiliency in teachers today. Resiliency training could provide a method with which educators could maintain passion and purpose in this vital field.

Summary

The students who found meaning in their experiences with RDE developed a motivation to encourage other institutions of higher learning to expand their curriculums to include programs that teach resiliency. After seeing the changes in the participants' behavior and attitudes, hearing them attest to a newfound understanding of who they are, and experiencing their enthusiasm for altering the way in which they respond to challenges and

adversity, establishing RDE in other colleges and universities has the potential to become a vital asset to student growth and development.

Recommendations for Future Research

The enthusiasm generated in the students and faculty as a result of their participation in RDE validated the need to promote instituting this type of curriculum in college programming, and also confirmed that further study could reveal even greater possibilities to affect resiliency in people. Although the emphasis of the study was to explore the meaning students made of resiliency through RDE, additional key findings became visible through the data collection and analysis. The findings included the efficacy of storytelling as a pedagogy; the importance of integrating learning in community through a (1) caring environment, (2) high expectations, and (3) opportunities to participate and contribute; and the transformative development observed through awareness, self-evaluation, practice, change, and extension. As I reflected upon these findings, it became apparent that there were points necessitating further exploration and study. These reflections provide the impetus to explore five recommendations for further study:

1. Replicate RDE in a class with a greater representation of diverse cultures, sexual orientation, and ethnic backgrounds. With a lack of diversity within the group of students in this study, it was difficult to measure the effect of the curriculum on those who had grown up in a culture different from that of white, middle class students, who were predominant in the RDE sessions. Gauging the congruency of the curriculum with the thinking and understanding of other cultures, ethnic experiences, and socioeconomic background is important in a global society such as ours.

2. Longitudinal studies provide evidence of long-term effectiveness. In order for educators to ascertain the enduring influence of RDE, it is necessary to repeat this study in a longitudinal format. A longitudinal study often involves gathering information from participants over an extended period of time to determine whether the changes in attitude and behavior lasted beyond the initial experience (Crowl, 1996). Observing the behaviors in students, established as a result of RDE, over an accumulated amount of time will show if a lasting effect remains a part in the lives of the participants and can therefore reinforce the reliability of the original study.
3. To further verify the validity of this research, a study of comparison groups could be established using two similar classes in order to measure the impact of RDE curriculum in determining resilient behaviors and attitudes. Comparison studies could be constructed to measure the effect of all three notions of RDE derived from this research (i.e., storytelling as pedagogy, learning in community, and transformative development), in classes incorporating RDE versus classes with no RDE curriculum.
4. The original curriculum was intended for a minimum of eight sessions. For institutional reasons, the curriculum was abbreviated to four sessions. Further study could be conducted on the influence of RDE when additional sessions are offered. Understanding develops slowly, and is often disseminated over a period of time for any single idea (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to better assess learning when it has had the opportunity to digest and permeate a student's thinking, behaviors, and attitude. Extending the number of RDE sessions provides opportunity to study the effects of supplementing the curriculum with the additional skills of RDE, including optimistic approaches and strengths-based assessment.

5. Replicating this study could easily be accomplished with a new freshmen class and, then, constructing a comparative analysis with the results of the original study. It would also be interesting to discover the effect of offering RDE to freshmen students during the second semester versus first semester. In addition, another study could compare the result of conducting the sessions during the daytime hours rather than in the evening.

In summary, the response of the participants supported the findings of previous research that resiliency can be taught. Although the findings in this study comprised an older set of students than that of most research studies in resiliency (Benard, 1991, 2004; Henderson, 1997; Krovetz, 1999; Pisapia & Westfall, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), it is significant because it confirms that resiliency can be learned by all ages.

Reflections

To reflect upon what has been learned, I must return to the questions that inspired the journey. Returning to the literature enabled me to ponder the presumptions I initially brought to the study. Many of them continue to exist, however, some less boldly than others.

As I embarked upon this study, I was curious to learn the impact that today's "helicopter parents" have had on the resiliency of college students. Did the hovering characteristics of these present-day parents prevent young adults from dealing with challenges, crisis, or adversity independently, with confidence, and skill? Would I find students on our college campuses lacking the ability to face these difficulties without crumbling, quitting, or engulfed in cynicism? Perhaps there could be found many examples of students stunted by the over-protective style of fearful parents. However, my experience

with the students in this study revealed young adults eager to learn and grow from the material presented in the RDE sessions. Could it be that their eagerness manifested because they were being allowed the opportunities to learn skills and an understanding of life that they had not explored previously? Could it be that the encouragement from the sessions ignited a spirit of independence and desire to grow in the ability to deal with life for all that it entails? Whatever the cause, as the researcher, I learned that RDE has the potential to positively affect student response to challenges and adversity encountered after they leave their parental home.

As mentioned previously, one of the biggest challenges in the study was determining which students to select to become participants. The responses shared by those in the class as to the affect that RDE had on their lives was amazing. It was humbling to learn that these few short sessions could have such an impact. I am anxiously curious to establish the gains that could be made if more time could be dedicated to such a class.

I returned to the question that drove the study: How do first semester post-secondary students make personal meaning of resiliency from involvement in resiliency education? I believe that the students made personal meaning of RDE in a variety of ways as was pertinent to each of their situations. As the students grappled with the concepts of resiliency, I observed a change in their behaviors, and heard their voices of commitment to face what may come with new attitudes and renewed determination. The data I collected supported my observations of the phenomenon that the students in this study had made personal meaning of resiliency through their understanding of the protective factors, as well as their ability to use the tools of reframing and self-talk to confront and address the issues they faced.

The literature on resiliency described protective factors of resiliency and the skills of reframing and self-talk used to abet resilient characteristics and behaviors. However, as referred to previously, most research has focused on resiliency education in PK-12 students. The literature available addressing resiliency education at the college level is virtually non-existent except for special populations. This study has introduced a curriculum, adaptable in nature, to be used at the post-secondary level with the express purpose of introducing resiliency development to college students. If this is the cutting edge of something that is good and worthy for improving the lives of students, then we must bring it forward in a voice that is heard clearly in our institutions of higher learning.

In this final reflection, I continued to be intrigued by the perception of what resiliency is and how it is recognized in one's life. Through life experiences, the participants from this study will gradually grow and mature, moving them from "novice" to "adaptive expert" in terms of putting resilient responses into practice. During the coursework for this doctorate, I came upon the concept of the "novice" and the "expert" as delineated in *How people learn* (National Resource Council, 2000). In terms of resiliency, the novice approach is to think deliberately, step-by-step, in order to tackle a problem effectively. However, an expert, who has practiced the skills of resiliency continuously and with intention, can understand the essence of what is needed to respond maturely and responsibly. To this concept I combined Chapter 2 in *How people learn* (National Resource Council, 2000) with learning theory and the student development theories researched by Chickering (1993), Baxter Magolda (2003), Kegan (1982), etc. The more students practice the resilient responses they have been exposed to during RDE, the more possible it is that they will automatically choose a positive and

effective response to a challenging situation. This is my ultimate goal in bringing the awareness of resiliency education to the post-secondary level.

In my own experience, I have been cognizant of resiliency research for many years. Having the exposure to the concept and tools of response, I now can say I understand the essence of resiliency and my reactions to adverse situations are calm and stable. It is not necessary for me to think in steps as with an algorithm. This has given me an approach to life about which I am eager and enthusiastic. As Louisa May Alcott (as cited in Partnow, 1992) wrote, "*I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning to sail my ship*" (p. 204).

Concluding my "journey to the dissertation," I have mixed emotions. I have thoroughly enjoyed the challenge as well as the opportunity to immerse myself in learning. As I reflect in the changes that have accumulated within my person because of this program, it is without a doubt that the ability to critically think has magnified and produced within me a heightened level of confidence in communication, synthesis of information, and the ability to formulate sound opinions and beliefs. In addition, the experience of conducting this study has given me the opportunity to put into action the leadership skills articulated during my coursework. It is with anticipation and excitement that I leave this program better equipped to reach out to the world with the knowledge I have gained through my research, determined to use it in order to positively affect people.

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APPENDIX A. HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

DATE: 8 April 2008
TO: Kristine Meyer
 c/o Dr. Barb Licklider, N247B Lagomarcino
CC: Dr. Barb Licklider
 N247B Lagomarcino
FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
 Office of Research Assurances

Institutional Review Board
 Office of Research Assurances
 Vice Provost for Research
 1138 Pearson Hall
 Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
 515 294-4267
 FAX 515 294-4566

IRB ID **07-159**

Approval Date: 8 April 2008

Date for Continuing Review: 13 March 2009

The Co-Chair of Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has conducted the annual continuing review of the protocol entitled: "The effects of teaching a curriculum of personal and environmental protective factors to post-secondary students in a resiliency awareness seminar." Your study has been approved for a period of one year. The continuing review date for this study is no later than **13 March 2009**.

Based on the information you provided in Section II of the documents submitted for continuing review, we have coded this study in our database as being permanently closed to the enrollment of new subjects, where all subjects have completed all research related activities and the study remains open only for data analysis. To open enrollment or initiate research-related interaction with subjects you must submit a modification and receive IRB approval prior to contacting subjects.

Even though enrollment of subjects has ended, federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. **three to four weeks**) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Any **changes in the protocol or consent form** should not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu).

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or other.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

ORA 06/07

APPENDIX B. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were some of your experiences and perceptions that you found meaning in during the sessions (and since) on resiliency?
2. How have they become meaningful in your life?
3. What were the personal resiliency factors to which you most related?
4. How do you think the information you learned from the sessions on resiliency will affect your behaviors or attitude?
5. As a result of this seminar, what is one thing you might consider doing differently in your life when faced with an adverse situation?
6. In your opinion, what would make a seminar such as this more affective for college students?
7. What would you like to learn more about in terms of resiliency as a result of these sessions?
8. How important were the addition of stories to the understanding of resiliency? How did they affect what our how you learned?

APPENDIX C. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the “aha” moments you experienced during the class sessions on resiliency awareness?
2. As you learned about the different personal and environmental protective factors, which were you able to identify any of them in your own lives?
3. What part of the class sessions did you find the most difficult or confusing to understand?
4. How do you think learning about the characteristics of resiliency will affect the way you respond to your life challenges?
5. What do you perceive as the possible long-term effects of this type of seminar on the resiliency of post-secondary students?
6. What was the most meaningful part of the seminar to you?
7. How do you make meaning of the four protective factors of resiliency in your life? What are your perceptions of resiliency in your life?
8. How do you make meaning of reframing in relationship to resiliency?
9. How do you make meaning of “self-talk in relationship to resiliency?
10. What difference could this make when you are faced with more serious setbacks?

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Amund,” said my great-great grandmother, Kari Ausen, pointing her finger sternly at her son-in-law, “you let Cora go to school!” Kari’s picture hangs stately on the wall of my home directly above the picture of my great-grandfather, Amund Jerdee, who is also situated there above the picture of my grandmother, Cora Jerdee Myhrwold. The story is legendary in my family. After my grandmother finished 8th grade around 1900, her father believed that was enough education. “Girls don’t need to go to school,” he often spouted to his family. Nevertheless, his mother-in-law interceded for her granddaughter and, hence, my grandmother was allowed to go to school.

I wonder whether it is possible that I am here today because of the assertiveness of a great-great grandmother, and the passion and desire to learn of a grandmother. Because of that story, education has been an integral part of each person in my family. As often expressed in this research, our personal stories have shaped us and molded us into what we have become.

I am deeply grateful to my dad and my husband to whom I have dedicated this dissertation. I am also deeply grateful for the support and love by my daughter, Maria (my first editor)—thanks for letting me keep a few of my touchy-feely comments in this scholarly work); my son, Andrew (my sojourner on the crusade to our dissertations...seeking our PhDs side by side has been one of my motivations...sorry I beat you by a year); my daughter-in-law, Alice (my encourager and sharer of wine and talks ...on to our dreams, right?); my Mom (my rock, my friend, my encourager, one who I always turn to for wisdom...and always caring for me like no other mother); my great sibs, whose shoulders I stand upon

(Deb and Wayne, Pete, Freda, Jim and Tammy), my supportive and loving mother and father-in-law (Harvey and Norma), The Cubic Concepts Group (Pat, Carolyn and Monica), Karen (my extra), The Card Club, my dissertation coach and my bridesmaid (Dan and Elaine) and a multitude of patient friends and neighbors!

I also want to thank Bob and Milly Rosdail Ozinga for providing my “home away from home” in Ames. Our many late night discussions over every topic imaginable cemented a friendship that is rich with love, respect, and joy. I have always said the joy in the journey was obtaining the PhD, but it was equal to the joy in the friendship we developed while you shared your home and hearts with me.

Thank you to Pat Hahn, my editor, and Judy Weiland, record analyst. The two of you make us look so good!

I acknowledge my committee with unending gratitude for their belief in me. Their support of my “unique nature” gave me confidence to write, explore, and believe that I could find something worthy to share with the world. I will continue striving to give life to my research. Dr. Larry Ebbers was the first to show me that the dream of completing a PhD was possible. He has been unwavering in his support. Dr. Jack Horner, long before the PhD was a glimmer in my eye, he showed me journal articles he published thus introducing me to a world I had not known and now reside. Drs. Joanne Marshall and Robyn Cooper were first my professors, guiding me expertly through theories and concepts, then willingly becoming a part of my journey with friendship and a sincere interest in my research.

I also thank Dr. Jan Wiersema, who first became a friend, then a colleague as we worked together teaching my curriculum on RDE to her leadership class. Your insight and attention to detail were invaluable in the success of the study. You gave me so much time as

you mentored me through teaching, data collecting and analysis, and writing. Your kindness and faith in me as a researcher, teacher, and learner helped me grow more than you know.

Finally, I give my deepest gratitude to my major professor, Dr. Barb Licklider. How often we wondered if Larry Ebberts knew what he was doing when he put us together! Barb, you have been my rock. You have led me through so much with your wisdom, insight, intelligence, and unwavering belief in me as a person and a learner. You encouraged my writing and accepted my unique style, my quirkiness, and unbridled enthusiasm for anything, hence my nickname, "Pinball!" I will always count you as a mentor and a dear friend. Thank you.

God has blessed me with a drive to learn, to try, to risk, to know and, to love. I am thankful for His many blessings and that He saw to it to surround me with these people who have helped me in this great adventure of life.