

Project ReConnect: Fostering Resilience within Disconnected Youths

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This qualitative research study identifies protective factors that foster resilience in disconnected youths (ages 16-18) who are participants in Project ReConnect, an alternative education program in New York City. Observations, participant observations, interviews, and focus groups were utilized to collect data from ten participants. Findings suggest a small class size, caring environment, and building unity among at-risk youths contribute to enhanced resilience in these youths. Examples of resilience, as well as implications for education will be discussed.

Matriculating through the adolescent stage can be very difficult for some. During this period, adolescents go through a plethora of psychological, social, and physiological changes. Many individuals within this challenging life period are faced with a number of risk factors which consequently makes them susceptible to a destructive life course (Aristilde, 2006). The extensive research (Brooks & Goldstein, 1001, 2006; Malekoff, 2004; Fraser & Richman, 2001) clearly illuminates the devastating effects poverty, abuse, violence, and neglect may have on the development of adolescents.

One particular developmental life task that may serve as a major impediment to healthy adolescent development, is the completion of high school, which is one of the most

prominent social contexts for adolescents (Aristilde, 2006). Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today's increasingly complex society and technological workplace. The completion of high school is required for accessing post-secondary education and is a minimum requirement for most jobs (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). High school dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed (Caspi, Wright, Moffit, & Silva, 1998).

According to Levitan (2005), youths between the ages of 16-24, unemployed and not in school, are “disconnected” and seriously at risk for failure. New York City has the third lowest graduation rate among the 50 largest school districts in the United States. Nearly one in six of New York City’s youths fail to graduate from high school and can be considered disconnected youths.

Wehlage (1989) argue that most studies show that disconnected youths are: a) of low socio-economic status, b) racial and ethnic minorities, c) low achieving, d) low scoring test takers, and e) frequent misbehavers. School programs were not the way to deal with individuals with these “uncontrollable social characteristics.” While these indicators may describe the “typical students” who drop out of school, there are also many who do not fit the profile. Many scholars argue that despite overwhelming adversities, there are some at-risk, disconnected youths who are able to overcome obstacles and become competent, productive young adults. These individuals have been referred to as being *resilient* (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999).

Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to recover and/or bounce back Normalcy after experiencing difficult situations (Rosenfeld, Lahad, & Cohen, 2001). It is used as a term to describe children who have been able to overcome the grips of poverty, abuse, neglect, and school failure who persevere

and lead productive lives (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). A child who optimally utilize available resources or benefits from them without a specific strategy or intervention, and in doing so produces positive result in the face of adversity can be called resilient (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999).

Factors that impact resilience have been categorized within the person, family, community, and other aspects of the environment. Factors that prevent the development of resiliency are known as “high risk factors” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2006; Loewenson & Blum, 2001) while those that contribute to, enhance, and promote resiliency are known as “protective factors.” Protective factors may include individual characteristics or environmental conditions that help adolescents thwart risk factors (Kirby & Fraser, 1987).

Several studies highlight role models to include teachers, administrators, and counselors as protective factors for at-risk youths (Werner, 1986; Dugan & Coles, 1989). According to Rosenfeld (2001), schools can become protective factors when they are sensitive to needs and hardships of youths who are exposed to risk factors. The dearth of literature on resiliency in disconnected youths suggests that schools do not traditionally promote resiliency due to their large class sizes and academically driven environments (Krovetz, 1999; Benard, 1993). Alternative education is usually the option that serves those most at risk including students who are: from minority backgrounds; expelled or suspended, and disenfranchised from the traditional high school experience (Lehr & Lange, 2003).

Project ReConnect

In an effort to address New York City’s disconnected youths, St. John’s University’s School of Education developed Project ReConnect, an alternative educational program designed to assist disconnected youths living in New York City transition to high school or prepares them to take the General Equivalency Diploma test (GED). The program is located at the Roy Wilkins Community Center in

Southeast Queens, New York and offers a variety of programs for individuals of all ages. The center is equipped with several offices, classrooms, two cafeterias, a weight room, a gymnasium, and a swimming pool.

Project ReConnect is a partnership between St. John's University and the Southern Queens Parks Association, Inc. (SQPA), a community-based organization. The goals of Project ReConnect are to provide students with academic services, mentoring, counseling, computer literacy, and test preparation assistance. In addition, students are provided with informational workshops on self-esteem building, study skills, time management, critical thinking skills, college linkages, and financial aid. Students have the opportunity to participate in career and college fairs, summer internship programs, and a host of cultural activities. Students are introduced to the job market and receive information on how to apply and interview for part- and full-time employment.

Each student enrolled is involved in all aspects of the program for one year. At the end of the year, students have the option of taking the GED test or transitioning back to high school. Project ReConnect participants outcomes are: a) competitive employment; (b) enrollment in or graduation from a two or four year college; (c) employment or a vocational/trade school; or (d) the armed forces.

Students living in New York City who have either dropped out or been removed from traditional high school are eligible for the program. Since its inception in 2004, Project ReConnect has served over 150 students, with an average of 50 students per year. To recruit students, Project Reconnect's administrative staff has made several visits to high schools speaking to principals and counselors. Fliers were also posted throughout the community (distributed in parks, churches, schools).

Studies have shown that the school structure and environment plays a critical role in students' school success. Therefore, it is important to understand the structural and environmental factors that promote and support successful

completion, thus enhancing resilience. Little is known about the impact that alternative education programs have on fostering resilience. To that end, the purpose of this study was to determine if and how Project ReConnect contributed to the resiliency of its at-risk study participants.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were students considered to be disconnected youths hereafter referred to as youths who successfully obtained their GED. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the youths. The youths enrolled in the program were between the ages of 16-19, unemployed, and had been either expelled or dropped out of high school due to truancy, violence, peer pressure, low-self esteem, or lack of academic, social, and emotional support from school staff. These youths were mainly residents of Jamaica, New York or the surrounding areas.

Selection criteria for participants in this study included: (a) regular attendance (defined as four or five days per week) to the program; and (b) achieving one or more of the aforementioned outcome measures. Ten youths (6 males, 4 females), a teacher, the assistant director, and the executive director were included in this study. The students ranged in age from 16-18 years of age. The majority of the youths were African Americans. However, one Indian female and one Hispanic male participated in the study (see Table 1 below).

Letters were sent to the homes of youths (who passed their GED test and are either working, in college, or in the military) soliciting their support for the study. Additionally, flyers were posted around the facility soliciting youths. Due to the nature and time constraints of this qualitative inquiry, the first ten youths who agreed to participate were accepted. Teachers and other staff affiliated with Project ReConnect were encouraged to participate in the study.

One of the researcher's role as a participant observer

Name	Age	Ethnicity	School Status
Charles	16	Black	Expelled
Dena	17	Black	Drop-out
Tam	17	Black	Drop-out
Larry	19	Black	Expelled
Steve	16	Black	Drop-out
Vinetha	18	Black	Drop-out
Robert	18	Black	Drop-out
Homaira	17	Indian	Drop-out
Hector	19	Hispanic	Drop-out

TABLE 1 *Study Participants*

was to serve as a counselor and assist the youths in coping with contextual factors that might impede their progress in the program and/or life. The goal was to conduct qualitative research which allowed the students to share their perspectives of the program. Rist (2000) indicates that a unique contribution to qualitative inquiry is to give voice to those who are often not heard.

Data Collection Procedures

Three data collection procedures were used in this study: interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with the youths to collect information on the youths' perceptions of Project ReConnect and how the program helped them be successful. These semi-structured interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes each. All students were asked the following questions.

- What led to your interest in Project ReConnect?
- What was it about the traditional high school that did not appeal to you?
- What made it easy for you to attend the Project ReConnect Program?

- What helped you to successfully complete the Project ReConnect Program?
- How did Project ReConnect help you deal with negative environmental and other issues in your life?

Two focus groups were conducted with five youths in each one. Each focus group lasted one and one-half hour. Specific questions from the focus group centered around the program's impact on the students. Questions included the following.

- What do you like most about the Project ReConnect Program?
- What do you like least about the program?
- What would you tell a student who inquires about Project ReConnect?

Due to the in-depth and flexible nature of qualitative inquiry, the researchers probed for additional information to better understand the context and meaning of participant answers when warranted (Merriam, 1998). Participant observations were conducted by the lead author in his role of counselor. Throughout the duration of the study, the lead researcher would spend a significant amount of time in the cafeteria and in the classroom observing student interactions among peers as well as with the teachers and administration.

Additionally, student interactions were observed before and after schools. Detailed field notes were taken during each observation. The cafeteria observations yielded rich, pertinent data. Often some of the student would be "short on cash" and ask one of his/her peers to "help him out." It was interesting to see that the student who did have any money would be ridiculed in a comical way but would always get something to eat.

In the classrooms, students could be observed intently listening to the teacher on some occasions and fiercely challenging the teacher on other occasions. The teachers would seemingly possess great poise in allowing for and crating environments where the students could be themselves

and freely express their opinions regarding various topics of discussion. Teachers were also observed to express their sincere interest in caring about their students' participation.

Before and after school observations confirmed the fact that the students really had a strong connection with each other as evidenced by the laughter and joking. The majority of the group would actually enter and exit the building as a single unit.

Data collected from field notes clearly indicates a united group with focus and purpose. The students appeared to be in an environment where they felt welcomed and valued. Additionally, it was somewhat humbling to witness the strong sense of camaraderie among the group.

Data gathered from the staff were obtained via semi-structured interviews. Specific questions that were asked included the following.

- What do you think were attributing factors for those students who successfully completed the Project ReConnect Program?
- What was it that you did as staff that you think helped students to succeed in this program?
- Please describe your interactions with the students in this program.
- If asked, what would students in this program say about your teaching/administrative style?

Data Analysis

The collection and analysis of data occurred continuously throughout this process. The interviews were analyzed using the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In particular, content analysis was used to interpret and categorize the interview data, allowing for a continuous discovery of the data and identifying themes. The use of content analysis classified the information being collected according to a conceptual framework.

Peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, long-term observation, and triangulation were implemented in order to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and credibility (Patton, 1990; Merriam, 1998) for this study. In this study, a peer debriefing process was conducted by an independent expert who is knowledgeable about qualitative inquiry, to listen to the researchers' ideas and/or concerns, to observe the data collection process, and provide support throughout the study. Peer debriefing helped address some inherent assumptions and biases that may have been present while analyzing data.

One of the researchers spent well over a year working with the students in a counseling capacity; the other researcher was a program administrator. These long-term interactions ensure the element of prolonged engagement with the study participants.

Triangulation is a process of comparing and cross checking the consistency of information derived from different times, through the use of different means of data collection (Patton, 1990). In this study, we conducted interviews, participant observations, and focus group data that we were able to triangulate.

Results

The results of the study suggest Project ReConnect is a protective factor for disconnected youths. The overwhelming attitude of the participants was that participating in Project ReConnect was a source of inspiration and hope.

Project ReConnect is a Caring Community

During the participant interviews, one of the first questions asked was: What made it easy for you to come and successfully complete the program? Each participant responded positively. Charles stated:

The teachers here are nice, and they care about you... they work with you. I had good teachers... The job helpers helped you a lot, they made it easy for you because you could go to school and then meet with them to help you look for a job, and I didn't have to worry about going to this place and that looking for a job and filling out applications. Everything was right here.

Dena began looking for an alternative program because she felt she “wasn’t getting the attention” she needed at her old high school. She indicates this by saying

Ms. R helped me out with my writing like I always thought I was a good writer as far as the essays, but I saw where I improved on my writing when I took those practice tests. And Mr. M was excellent in math. I never had that connection with math, but he showed in a way where I actually felt like I know something like okay I'm understanding it. Ms. R and Mr. M, they really care about us doing good! They are very dedicated!

The concept of caring was a prevalent theme that emerged from the data. Staff data seemed to correlate with the student perspectives as they relate to caring. One staff member responses capture the essence of the staff’s perspective when she stated, “With the assistance of a caring, patient, supportive but firm staff member, students begin to take ownership of their education, set goals, and work towards achieving these goals.”

Project ReConnect Promotes Unity

An emerging theme that surfaced was a sense of unity at Project ReConnect which served as a means to motivate students to support one another. Tam, who struggled with getting along with her peers in the beginning because of a

“lack of trust” in everybody, eventually became a well-liked student. She was known to help students in a number of ways. Tam mentioned:

Being in a situation with other people like you helped me a lot....Tonia, she dropped out of school because she felt like she wasn't getting no attention, and you felt the same way so you like can actually connect or relate to that person. That doesn't mean you have to be best friends with that person...It makes you want to stay and help each other.

Robert stated,

There are people in here just like me like who dropped out of high school, and I see that they can come in here and do it and I say to myself I can to. ...The people that finished were there for each other and helped each other out.

After serving time “upstate,” Larry came back home and was introduced to Project ReConnect by his cousin, who was a student in Project ReConnect. Larry quickly learned that his peers were a valuable source for him getting through the program. He stated:

My classmates helped me out a lot, like we would study together in a classroom or sometime like when I'm going through a problem, and I might disagree with what the teacher was saying, they would come to me and tell me to calm down. It was basically like we were one big family in here. Everybody stuck together, and nobody really had problems with each other. Everybody was here for the same reason...That's the main reason I stayed.

All of the staff alluded to the fact that a mission of Project ReConnect is to create an environment where the students would be supportive of each other. One staff member mentioned:

The students enrolled in Project ReConnect are not atypical of students who have not met with success in traditional secondary schools. These students have a host of social, emotional, economic, and family issues that impacted their decision to drop out of high school. Project ReConnect is designed to help participants identify and address barriers to success. It provides a risk free environment for a cohort of students who work toward the same goal of getting back on track and continuing on a path to a more promising future.

Small Class Size

Steve knew Project ReConnect was the right place for him when a staff member came to his school and conducted a meeting about how the program. He became intrigued. When asked what made it easy for him to come and complete the program, he said,

For me it was easy because it...was a decent amount of kids. I felt comfortable in here. It was a small group and we got to know each other, and the teachers got to know us. It wasn't like that at my old high school!

Vinetha felt the small class sizes played a major part in her completing the program. She states:

I liked coming here because I could focus because there weren't a lot of distractions. The classes were small and I really liked that.

Class size was a key finding from the perspective of the staff as well. One staff member stated,

From its smaller, more personal learning environment to the one-on-one educational mentoring, and counseling sessions, students felt comfortable admitting to gaps in their knowledge base as well as articulating their need for help!

Examples of Resilience

Many of the students discussed a number of issues with which they were able to cope and persevere to complete the program despite hardships. They all attributed participating in Project ReConnect as a vital aspect in their coping process. One of the students, “Robert,” mentioned that the stress of living in “the hood” is often unbearable. He stated,

I’m around negativity every day of the week in my hood. It’s hard to escape! I’m tired of getting high all day, everyday! I’m tired of seeing the crackheads and the hoes in the hood. Being in the program takes me away and I am the first one here and the last one to leave.

Tam attributes Project ReConnect for helping to show her how to deal with people in various situations. She states,

Before I came here, I had a real bad attitude, especially with the teachers. I didn’t like when some teachers would call me out, and I would go off on them. The teachers here respect you, and I thank them because they showed me how to deal with people better.

Discussion

The students in this study struggled academically, socially, and emotionally in the traditional high schools. All study participants identified Project ReConnect as a safe place without a lot of distractions. Several students indicated that they were able to focus and excel in all aspects of the program due to the small class sizes. One participant stated that, at his previous high school, he “felt like a number.” Other participants asserted that classes were overcrowded and prevented students from receiving individualized attention. Although the researchers will not argue that small classrooms are a cure-all, fix-all, we do believe that when classrooms are not intimidating due to their large size, students can better navigate through all aspects of the classroom environment.

Implications for Education

Nel Noddings (2002; 1992) have written extensively about the ethics of caring. Perhaps one of the most salient findings from this study for the education community is that students do need caring teachers as well as a caring academic environment. Participants stressed that Project ReConnect staff genuinely cared about their well being. This feeling had a positive impact on their success in the program. Additionally, the data analyzed from the staff reveals the importance of a caring environment on the enhancement of student resilience. Caring teachers are critical elements of public education. Therefore, interventions should focus on creating an ethos of caring in schools by encouraging staff to create caring learning environments for their students.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations; these include the small sample size and use of self-report measures. Due to the nature of self-reporting, there is not any assurance that the participants are giving truthful responses. Since the study researchers were also Project ReConnect counselor and administrator, participants may have felt the need to provide

more socially desired responses. Because of the small sample size, the results are also limited in their generalizability.

Future Research

The results of this study yield promising information regarding an alternative educational program and its ability to foster resilience in disconnected youths. Future studies may want to consider looking into the ethnographies of schooling to gain an in-depth look at the lives of disconnected youths. Examining the impact of various alternative education programs may be a good start. Additionally, conducting large scale, cross-cultural comparison studies may assist in the development of culturally-relevant and appropriate programs for disconnected youths.

Conclusion

The student participants in this study provided invaluable data which can be used to better equip educational programs to foster success and resilience in students at risk of failure. Their collective message is very clear. They fully endorse a small, caring, supportive, and therapeutic educational environment. Project ReConnect staff members have created such an environment where students can freely express their opinions and where students report they are highly valued and respected by the staff.

As a result, these students acquired the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become academically successful. The students have established relationships with caring staff members who have afforded them necessary personal attention and exhibited empathy, understanding, and acceptance toward them. Such support has inspired these at-risk students to flourish, therefore decreasing their chances of remaining disconnected youths.

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