2014

Academically Resilient English Language Learners: A Focus Group Study Exploring Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Michelle Abrams-Terry
Virginia Commonwealth University

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ACADEMICALLY RESILIENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY EXPLORING RISK FACTORS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Abby, and my mom, Grace. The time spent completing this dissertation would have been so much more difficult had it not been for your love, understanding, prayers, support, and encouragement. I am truly thankful and blessed to have both of you in my life.
Acknowledgments

I owe a special thanks to my chair, Dr. Cheri Magill, for her professional guidance, patience, time, and support through this process during the years that it took to complete. Her invaluable insight, advice, and constructive feedback were appreciated.

I also would like to thank Drs. Micah McCreary, Marie Shoffner, and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley for their valuable contributions and support as members of my dissertation committee. I truly am grateful that they were on my committee.
Table of Contents

List of Tables ......................................................................................................................... vi
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................ vii
Abstract .............................................................................................................................. viii
I. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1
   Overview .......................................................................................................................... 1
   A Growing Population ................................................................................................. 2
   English Language Learners Count ........................................................................... 7
   Statement of Problem ................................................................................................. 12
   Rationale for Study of Problem .................................................................................. 12
   Literature Background ............................................................................................... 12
   Statement of Purpose ................................................................................................. 16
   Research Questions ...................................................................................................... 17
   Methodology ................................................................................................................ 17
   Brief Summary of Findings and Conclusions ............................................................. 18
   Definition of Terms ...................................................................................................... 19
   Description of Dissertation Chapters ........................................................................ 21
II. Review of Literature ....................................................................................................... 23
   The Agentic Model of Academic Resilience ............................................................... 23
   Risk Factors ................................................................................................................ 25
   Protective Factors ...................................................................................................... 32
   Academic Resilience ................................................................................................... 33
   Resilient versus Non-resilient English Language Learners ...................................... 38
   Summary ..................................................................................................................... 43
III. Methodology .................................................................................................................. 44
   Purpose ......................................................................................................................... 44
   Research Questions ...................................................................................................... 45
   Design ......................................................................................................................... 45
Procedures .................................................................................................................. 49
Data Analysis ............................................................................................................ 53
Trustworthiness of Results ....................................................................................... 56
Limitations ................................................................................................................ 58
Summary .................................................................................................................... 59
IV. Findings ............................................................................................................... 60
Student Participant Profiles ..................................................................................... 60
Summary of Group Characteristics ......................................................................... 63
Thematic Analysis .................................................................................................... 63
Risk Factors ............................................................................................................. 65
Protective Factors .................................................................................................... 68
Emerging Themes ..................................................................................................... 77
Summary .................................................................................................................... 79
V. Conclusions and Recommendations .................................................................... 80
Purpose of the Study ................................................................................................. 80
Research Questions .................................................................................................. 80
Discussions of Findings and Research .................................................................... 81
Recommendations for Practice ................................................................................ 89
Recommendations for Research ............................................................................... 91
Conclusions ............................................................................................................... 92
List of References ..................................................................................................... 94
Appendix A: Parental/Guardian Permission Form ................................................ 103
Appendix B: Youth Participant Assent Form .......................................................... 106
Appendix C: Student Questionnaire ......................................................................... 108
Appendix D: Interview Question Guide .................................................................... 110
Vita ............................................................................................................................ 117
List of Tables

Table 1. The Growing Numbers of English Learners in U.S. Public Schools .................. 3
Table 2. Summary Federal and State Accountability of English Language Learners ..... 10
Table 3. ELL Risk Factors ......................................................................................... 31
Table 4. ELL Protective Factors .................................................................................. 33
Table 5. Various Definitions of Resilience and Key Authors ........................................ 36
Table 6. Corresponding Research and Focus Group Question Guide .............................. 51
List of Figures

Figure 1. ELL Enrollment in Virginia Public Schools (1996-2013) .......................... 4
Figure 2. Number of ELLs in Virginia and the U.S. Public Schools (2009-2010).......... 5
Figure 3. Growth of ELLs in the Study School Division (1996-2013) ......................... 6
Figure 4. Abrams-Terry’s Agentic Cycle of Academic Resilience ......................... 83
Abstract

ACADEMICALLY RESILIENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY EXPLORING RISK FACTORS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

By Michelle Nicole Abrams-Terry, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Director: Cheryl C. Magill, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership
School of Education

In this study, the researcher explored high school English language learners’ perceptions of risk factors and protective factors present in their academic and social lives. The researcher also explored how these students negotiated risk factors and used protective factors to be academically resilient. Therefore, the study was designed to examine academic resilience from the students’ perspectives, allowing them to share their story about their success in high school. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What risk factors are present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?
2. Which protective factors do high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?

The researcher collected and analyzed qualitative data using key characteristics of focus group analysis. Nine students voluntarily participated in three different semi-structured focus group meetings.

The findings revealed that risk factors such as lack of English language ability, low expectations of teachers, inability to form new relationships, stress, and inattentiveness prevented students from being successful. In addition, the students discussed how several protective factors like learning English, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, establishing and implementing good study habits, and possessing certain inner qualities helped them be academically resilient. Two themes that emerged were students (1) choosing to be academically resilient and (2) actively seeking sources of help.

Based on this study, suggestions for educators are as follows: (1) consider providing more language support for newcomers; (2) include and build upon parent-school and teacher-student relationships; (3) encourage and provide ways for students to form relationships with others through school-based programs; (4) foster and continue to support the growth of the students’ academic skills; (5) find ways for students to become more involved with community-based services and programs; and (6) stress the importance of holding all students to high standards, regardless of students’ English language proficiency levels.
Keywords: academic resilience, English as a second language, English language learner, protective factors, risk factors
I. Introduction

Overview

Successfully educating an increasingly ethnically diverse population of students in public schools is an on-going challenge for public school systems and their boards. Since the mid-1990s, school systems have experienced major increases in students who speak a language other than English at home. While there has been extensive research on academic resilience in English-speaking students, few studies have focused on academic resilience in English language learners (ELLs). However, with the growing population of ELLs, there is a need to explore the risk factors that they experience as well as the protective factors that help them be academically resilient.

It is important to note that the term “limited English proficient” is the legal term used in federal and state legislation to describe students who speak a language other than English as their native language. When referring to these groups of students, the term “English language learner” or “English learner” generally is preferred in scholarly circles. Those two before mentioned terms are used throughout the literature as they take a positivistic approach to how these students acquire English language skills. Regarding this study, “English language learner” or “ELL” were the preferred terms to use when referring to students that were labeled as limited English proficient (LEP) in the legislation.
A Growing Population

There has been a sharp increase in the number of ELLs enrolled in public schools over the latter part of the 21st century. As a result, many public schools expanded the types of services that they provide to meet the variety of needs of this rising population of students. Exploring the risk factors and protective factors involved in promoting academic resilience in ELLs helps schools to facilitate resilience in a growing population of linguistically diverse students.

The number of school-age children who speak a language other than English at home continues to grow. Between 1980 and 2009, the number of school-age children (i.e., children ages 5-17) who speak a language other than English at home increased to 11.2 million (21% of the of school-age children) from 4.7 million (10%) (Aud et al., 2011). Similarly, U.S. Census data from 2006 to 2010 show that 20.1% of people ages 5 and older in the United States speak a language other than English at home. In Virginia, 16.1% of people ages 5 and older speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The rising number of school-age children who speak a language other than English at home has directly impacted the increased number of ELLs enrolled in public schools and the need for more language services. From 1995 to 2005, the number of ELLs enrolled in public K-12 schools increased by 57%. From 1997 to 2009, the number of ELLs grew from 3.5 million to 5.3 million (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). Table 1 depicts the increased growth in the number of ELLs in the United States from 1994 to 2010.
### Table 1

*The Growing Numbers of English Learners in U.S. Public Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>PK-12 Enrollment</th>
<th>PK-12 Growth Since 1994-95 (%)</th>
<th>EL Enrollment</th>
<th>EL Growth Since 1994-95 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>47,745,835</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2,184,696</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-00</td>
<td>47,356,089</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
<td>4,416,580</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-01</td>
<td>47,665,483</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>4,584,947</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>48,296,777</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4,750,920</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>49,478,583</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>5,044,361</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>49,618,529</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5,013,539</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>48,982,898</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5,119,561</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>49,324,849</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5,074,572</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>49,792,462</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5,218,800</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>49,838,122</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5,297,935</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>49,487,174</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>5,346,673</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>49,866,700</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>5,208,247</td>
<td>63.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from “The Growing Numbers of English Learner Students” by National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011.

From 1999 to 2010, the population growth of ELLs increased from 38.7% to 63.5% within a 10-year period. Based on these data illustrating a marked increase in the enrollment of over 2 million ELLs by 2010, many U.S. public schools have needed to adjust their ways of educating these students to accommodate their language and academic needs.
The increase in the ELL student population nationwide is mirrored across several states and in Virginia. In fact, the number of ELLs more than doubled in 20 states from 1995 to 2005. Virginia was one of thirteen states that saw a growth in ELL enrollment of over 200% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2007). As indicated in Figure 1, the ELL enrollment in public schools steadily increased in Virginia over the past 15 years.

![Figure 1. ELL Enrollment in Virginia Public Schools (1996-2013). Adapted from “Limited English Proficient Students (LEP) Enrollment” by Virginia Department of Education, 2013.](image)

As shown in Figure 1, there were 23,128 ELLs enrolled in Virginia in 1996. By 2002, the number of ELLs in Virginia more than doubled to 49,840. In 2005, the number of ELLs in Virginia more than tripled to 72,380. In 2013, the number of ELLs in Virginia was at an all-time high of 93,746. The growth in ELLs evidenced in Virginia was just under the national average from 2009 to 2010. Figure 2 compares the number of ELLs in Virginia with that of the U.S. during that time period.

Figure 2 also illustrates that the number of ELLs enrolled in Virginia public schools was slightly less at 86,751 than the national average of 92,626.

Similar to the national and state growth trends, the overall ELL population in central Virginia has increased. In the suburban central Virginia school division selected for this study, the total number of ELLs has more than tripled from 1996 to 2013. Figure 3 illustrates the increased enrollment of ELLs in the division.
There were 688 ELLs in the study school division in 1996. In 2004, the number of ELLs more than doubled with 1,980 enrolled in the division. In 2009 and 2010, the number of ELLs declined to 2,253 and 2,268, respectively. By 2012, the number of ELLs increased to an all-time high of 2,703. In 2013, the total number of ELLs slightly decreased to 2,681.

Given the increasing numbers of ELLs enrolled in public schools in the country, state, and division used for this study, it is becoming increasingly more important for schools to find ways to meet the needs of diverse populations of students. In order to meet the needs of this growing population of students, it is important to explore the risk factors that ELLs experience. In addition, studying the protective factors that they use to be academically resilient would be advantageous to educators who want to help ELLs be more successful in school.

\[\text{Figure 3. Growth of ELLs in the Study School Division (1996-2013). Adapted from “Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students Enrollment,” by Virginia Department of Education, 2013.}\]
English Language Learners Count

Since the late 1960s, federal legislative efforts have been made to include rights for ELLs in public education. Starting with an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1968, Title VII or the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) of 1968 is noted as the first official federal recognition of the needs of ELLs (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988). The essential goal of the BEA (1968) was to provide federal funding for education programs, teacher training, development of instructional materials, and promotion of parent involvement to help ELLs. The statute was reauthorized in 1974, 1978, 1984, and 1988. However, its central goal of whether to increase students’ transition to English or to promote bilingualism was left undecided (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988).

The first U.S. Supreme Court case regarding the education of ELLs was Lau v. Nichols (1974). In Lau v. Nichols (1974), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that San Francisco’s school district violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects people from discrimination based on race, color or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. The U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling stated that the San Francisco Unified School District failed to provide English language instruction for ELLs.

Shortly after the Lau v. Nichols (1974) decision, Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974). The Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974 mandates that no state can deny equal educational opportunities to any individual. More specifically, the EEOA (1974) requires public schools to provide
instruction to ELLs to help them overcome language barriers that may prevent them from equal participation in education programs.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a time when the population of ELLs was increasing significantly, there was much debate about bilingual education (Crawford, 2000). Subsequently, the foci of English-only movements were ensuring that ELLs were taught in non-bilingual settings and making English the official language of several states and the federal government (Crawford, 2000). In 1998, California was one of the first states to pass an English-only education law with the approval of Proposition 227. Proposition 227 allowed ELLs to receive one year of “sheltered English instruction” or a class where “nearly all the instruction is in English.” Thereafter, they were to be placed in “English language mainstream classrooms” where all instruction was English-only (Cal. Ed. Code § 1010, 300-340, 1998). Similarly in 2000 and 2002, Arizona and Massachusetts respectively passed English-only instruction initiatives for ELLs.

Currently, the ESEA (2001) includes ELLs under Title III Part A or the English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act of 2001. The main purpose of this statute is to increase states’ accountability regarding the academic achievement of ELLs in core academic classes as well as the development and increased proficiency in English language skills. Additionally, these students are included as one of the subgroups used for determining states’ and school districts’ adequate yearly progress toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency in mathematics and reading or language arts by 2014 (ESEA, 2001).
In Virginia, the General Assembly enacted House Bill 2589 during the 2009 legislative session as mandated by the ESEA (2001). The statute states that local school divisions in the Commonwealth “shall administer a limited English proficiency assessment that may be locally developed or selected and has been approved by the Virginia Board of Education in accordance with federal requirements for the 2009-2010 school year” (Virg. Leg. Code ch. 488, § 1.1, 2009). During the 2010 Virginia legislative session, Senate Bill 354 was passed without inclusions of year limits (Virg. Leg. Code ch. 254, § 1.1, 2010).

ELLs also are included in the Regulations for Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia under student achievement expectations. These regulations state that ELLs “shall participate in the Virginia assessment program and have a school-based LEP committee determine LEP student participation” (Virg. Admin. Code 8 VAC 20-131-30). In addition, the code allows ELLs in grades kindergarten through eight to receive one-time exemptions from the Standards of Learning tests in writing, science, and history and social science.

Additionally, ELLs are included in the Code of Virginia - Standards of Quality under Standards 1 and 2. Standard 1 states that these students should be enrolled in “appropriate instructional programs” (Virg. Leg. Code ch. 714, § 22.1-253.13:1, 2003). This standard also provides flexibility for school divisions to use state and local funds to employ additional teachers qualified to provide instruction to ELLs. Standard 2 states “each local school board shall provide a program of high-quality professional development” (Virg. Leg. Code ch. 714, § 22.1-253.13:2, 2003) to assist teachers and
principals with acquiring the skills needed to work with ELLs to increase student achievement and expand the knowledge and skills students require to meet the standards for academic performance set by the Virginia Board of Education. Table 2 summarizes the federal and state statutes and state regulations that are considered landmarks in providing rights for and meeting the educational needs of ELLs.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statute/ Regulation</th>
<th>Other Names</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual Education Act (1968)</td>
<td>Title VII of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1968)</td>
<td>To provide federal funding for education programs, teacher training, development of instructional materials, and promotion of parent involvement to help LEP children.</td>
<td>The first official federal recognition of the needs of ELLs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights Act (1964)</td>
<td>Title VI</td>
<td>To protect people from discrimination based on race, color or national origin in programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance.</td>
<td>The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the San Francisco public school system violated ELLs’ rights by not providing them with English language assistance in Lau v. Nichols (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974)</td>
<td>EEOA (1974)</td>
<td>To provide equal educational opportunities to all individuals.</td>
<td>Required public schools to provide instruction to ELLs to help them overcome language barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation/Standard</td>
<td>Title/Act</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Code/Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act (2001)</td>
<td>Title III Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001)</td>
<td>To increase states’ accountability regarding the academic achievement of LEP students in their core academic classes and development and increased proficiency in their English language skills.</td>
<td>Replaced Title VII and provided a formula-grant program to states to help ELLs meet content standards and promote English language acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Standards of Accreditation</td>
<td>Virginia Standards of Accreditation</td>
<td>To provide an essential foundation of educational programs for all students and raise student achievement.</td>
<td>Includes ELLs in the assessment program, makes provisions for ELLs’ participation in assessments, and holds local school divisions accountable for ELLs’ performance on the assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code of Virginia - Virginia Standards of Quality</td>
<td>Virginia Standards of Quality</td>
<td>To ensure that ELLs are enrolled in an appropriate instructional program and personnel receive staff development to increase student academic performance.</td>
<td>Grants school divisions flexibility to spend funds to support ELLs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Statement of Problem

Much is known about the factors that predict academic failure and attrition or early school exit; however, not as much is known about the factors that promote academic resilience in ELLs. Risk factors like limited or no schooling, having limited English proficiency, and exhibiting internal or external stress may help identify students that need services (Reyes & Jason, 1993; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Torodova, 2008; and Perez et al., 2009). However, those risk factors provide little information about the protective factors that promote academic resilience in ELLs. Also, the risk factors do not explain individual differences or why some ELLs who are at-risk educationally do not drop out of school, but rather, excel academically. A second aim of this study was to examine the protective factors that academically resilient students use to be successful in school as not much is known about what protective factors ELLs use.

Rationale for Study of Problem

This study looked at and examined factors that promote academic resilience in a select group of ELLs. Understanding the factors that promote academic resilience may prove beneficial to designing more effective prevention and intervention educational programs that build on the existing strengths of ELLs’ academic success. Therefore, the study took a strength model perspective as opposed to a deficit model perspective.

Literature Background

Based on the purpose of the study, it was necessary to understand risk factors and protective factors as they relate to academic resilience. Therefore, the two sections of the literature background were organized around the two main research questions. The first
section summarizes research on academic risk factors. The second section focuses on research on protective factors.

**Academic Risk Factors and English Language Learners**

The literature on the influence of risk factors on the academic success of high school students suggested that combinations of risk factors contribute to poor academic performance (Durlak, 1998). Furthermore, research has indicated that risk factors related to lack of academic success can be internal and external or a mixture of both. Therefore, researchers suggest that both external and internal risk factors influence students’ academic performance.

In the literature on risk factors, resilient or academically successful (low-risk) students were often compared to non-resilient or academically unsuccessful (high-risk) students by looking at family and individual background characteristics and classroom practices that purportedly foster resiliency. Few studies have looked specifically at potential risk factors for English language learners. Of those few studies, Hispanic students tend to be the population of students studied.

For example, Reyes and Jason’s (1993) study concluded that high-risk and low-risk students shared many similarities with respect to socioeconomic status and family structure and found that the students’ responses were based in Hispanic culture. Reyes and Jason (1993) concluded that low-risk students were more satisfied with their school and criticized teachers for their put-downs of students who “have a harder time” in school (p. 67). They also suggested that the successful students were better able to conform to
the school’s rules and procedures, which facilitated a greater sense of satisfaction with their school.

In another study, Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova (2008) investigated the experiences of immigrants over time, including students’ academic performance in school. Their data suggest that behavioral engagement, English-language proficiency, having two parental figures in the home, maternal education, and the father’s employment are positively correlated to grades. The students’ English language proficiency levels and behavioral engagement were the greatest predictors of grade point average (GPA). Further, these researchers found that students who possessed stronger English skills were more likely to earn better grades. Also, students’ scores on the Bilingual Verbal Ability Tests were strongly predictive of their academic achievement. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova (2008) also reported that two-thirds of the participants experienced a decline in their academic performance based on their grade point averages during the five years. They also found that the high achievers maintained an average GPA of 3.5 across the five years of the study.

Perez et al.’s study (2009) explored the influence of social, educational, and psychological experiences on 110 undocumented Latino college students. The researchers concluded that three factors were evident based on the results of the study. Those factors are (1) academic success or resilience was related to both personal and environmental resources; (2) academic performance was generally positive when various resources were available; and (3) high-risk and resilient groups suffered significantly higher levels of adversity. Additionally, they found that psychosocial stressors such as undocumented
status, socioeconomic hardship, and low parental education represented significant challenges for the undocumented students.

**Protective Factors and English Language Learners**

Most of the studies on protective factors can be placed into three categories. First, there are studies that focused on external factors and the role these factors played in the academic success of students. Second, there are studies that focused on the role of internal factors. The third category includes studies that focused on the interplay of external and internal protective factors. There are very few studies that examine the protective factors that relate to academic resiliency in ELLs, particularly in the United States. Of those studies, most focus on comparing resilient versus non-resilient students.

For example, Alva (1991) conducted a comparative quantitative study to examine the possible reasons as to why some Hispanic students, who shared a similar sociocultural background, were academically successful and others were not. The researcher found that protective factors contributed to students’ academic achievement and were more important than the potentially detrimental effects of sociocultural risk factors on students’ academic performance. She concluded that academically successful students were more likely to feel encouraged and prepared to attend college, enjoy attending school and being involved in school activities, experience fewer conflicts and difficulties in their interpersonal relationships with other students, and experience fewer family conflicts and difficulties.

Likewise, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) conducted a quantitative study to examine the protective factors that contribute to Mexican-American high school students’
academic resilience and achievement. The researchers found that resilient students have significantly higher perceptions of family and peer support, teacher feedback, positive ties to school, value placed on school, peer belonging, and familism than non-resilient students.

As a result, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) suggested that family and peer support along with value placed on school were consistent predictors of academic resilience. The researchers also found that a supportive academic environment and sense of belonging were significant predictors of resilience. They added that cultural influences may contribute to resilient outcomes.

In summary, most of the literature on resilient and non-resilient culturally diverse students focuses on Latino or Hispanic students. There are few studies that explicitly focus on examining academic risk factors encountered by ELLs as a diverse group of students. There is even less research on the protective factors involved in ELLs’ academic resilience.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore high school English language learners’ perceptions of risk factors and protective factors in their academic and social lives. It also discovered how these students negotiated risk factors and used protective factors to be academically resilient.
Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study. The questions are as follows:

1. What risk factors are present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?
2. Which protective factors do high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?

Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature. It was a focus group study that explored the risk factors that high school ELLs experience as well as the protective factors that the ELLs use to be academically resilient. The researcher served as the focus group moderator and used a semi-structured interview guide to guide the focus group discussions. Questions were designed to gather data based on the secondary ELLs’ discussion of factors identified in the review of literature regarding risk factors, protective factors, and those factors’ role in academic resilience. As recommended by qualitative research methodologies, a digital voice recorder was used to record the focus group discussion (Barbour, 2007; Krueger, 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

The researcher identified emergent themes by listening to the transcripts of the focus group interviews, using field notes, and reviewing post-focus group notes. The researcher applied the constant comparative method to examine the views and experiences of the participants. Using the constant comparative method allowed subtle but potentially important differences to be illuminated (Barbour, 2001). Also, the
researcher analyzed the discussions for inconsistencies and contradictions to identify the opinions, ideas, or feelings that repeat.

Purposeful sampling was used to select the student participants for the study. The study participants met the following criteria: were enrolled in a public high school, had completed a minimum of one year of high school in the United States, were identified as an ELL enrolled in an English as a second language (ESL) program, had a World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA®) English language proficiency level of two or higher in speaking based on their spring 2013 WIDA® Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for (ACCESS) for ELLs® (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2014) language proficiency test results, spoke Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, or Nepali as their first language (i.e., the most commonly spoken languages in Virginia and the study division) (Virginia Department of Education, 2013), and successfully completed four or more classes taken during the 2012-2013 school year with grades of “A,” “B,” or “C.”

**Brief Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

The student participants in the focus group meetings discussed several risk factors that prevented them from being successful in the past. They primarily discussed their lack of English language ability and low expectations of teachers. However, they mentioned other possible risk factors (e.g., the inability to form new relationships, stress, and their inattentiveness) less often.

In addition, these students shared several protective factors that help them be academically resilient. A great deal of their discussions focused on their need to learn
English and the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships. To a lesser extent, they discussed how establishing and implementing good study habits and possessing certain inner qualities helped them be academically resilient.

Based on analyses of the data, two themes emerged. First, students chose to be more academically resilient in school. Regardless of what caused their past failure, the students discussed taking ownership of their shortcomings (e.g., lack of English language skills, not taking the initiative to form relationships with their teachers and other students, etc.) and did not blame others for their failure. Second, students actively sought help from various sources. They repeatedly acknowledged that they needed help and could not be successful alone or without the help of others. Clearly, these students possessed the ability to know when they needed help and to ask for it. Teachers, parents, relatives, friends, and other students were those from whom they oftentimes sought help.

**Definition of Terms**

The terms and associated definitions used in this study are listed below:

Academic resilience: a student’s ability to effectively deal with setbacks, challenges, adversity, and pressure in the academic setting.

English language learner (ELL): a person who is in the process of acquiring English language skills and speaks a first language other than English.

English language proficiency (ELP) level: a measurement of a person’s English language ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Limited English proficient (LEP): Limited English Proficient means an individual—
(A) who is aged 3 through 21;

(B) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;

(C) (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;

(ii) (I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English proficiency; or

(iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant; and

(D) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual any of the following:

(i) the ability to meet the State's proficient level of achievement on State assessments described in section 1111(b)(3);

(ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or

(iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society (ESEA, §9101(25), 2001).

Protective factor: characteristic of the individual, family, school, and community that can change a negative outcome and foster resilience.
Positive adaptation: the ability to adjust, maintain, or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity.

Risk factor: a variable that increases the probability of a future negative outcome.

**Description of Dissertation Chapters**

The researcher organized this dissertation into five chapters. Chapter 1, Introduction, includes the development of the study’s context by providing background information, the explicit statement of the problem addressed, and a summary of the state of existing research on the topic of interest. The researcher also addresses the purpose of the study and states the research questions. In addition, this chapter includes an overview of the components of this study, a brief summary of the findings and conclusions, and a description of terms.

In Chapter 2, Review of Literature, the researcher organizes it into three sections. In the first section, the researcher describes the theoretical framework that guided this study. The researcher organized the other two main sections around the research questions. The first section deals with research on academic risk factors. The second section summarizes research on protective factors and academic resilience. Collectively, this information aided in providing the context in which this study was conceptualized. A review of relevant literature in each of those areas was analyzed critically to permit inclusion of only that information which directly related to this study.

In Chapter 3, Methodology, the researcher describes in detail the methods and procedures that comprised the research protocol utilized for this study. The researcher also introduces and describes the overall research design protocol. The protocol
addressed sampling procedures, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. In addition, the researcher specifies issues related to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the results as well as limitations of the findings.

Chapter 4, Findings, consisted of two main sections. First, participant profiles were created to introduce the participants who shared their ideas and aided in this study. Also, a summary of group characteristics was included. In the second section, the researcher presents themes as they emerged from the data analysis of participants’ responses to the key research questions. In the last part of this chapter, emerging themes that the researcher observed are discussed. Particular attention is given to the discussion of the findings in an effort to establish the trustworthiness of conclusions.

The final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 5, Conclusions and Recommendations, is dedicated to discussion of the findings as they pertained to the research. A summary of the purpose of the study is included. In addition, attention is given to addressing the implications of this study as well as providing recommendations for future research of the topic of interest in this study.
II. Review of Literature

It is necessary to understand risk factors and protective factors as they relate to academic resilience. Therefore, the theoretical framework that guided this study and a summary and synthesis of the research that motivated this study are included in this chapter. There are two main sections of the literature review that are organized around the research questions. The first section deals with research on academic risk factors. The second section summarizes research on protective factors.

The Agentic Model of Academic Resilience

Several theories related to resilience were found throughout the literature. These theories provide explanations for how students exposed to risk factors use protective factors to influence positive academic outcomes. However, Giddens (1979) Agentic Model was selected for this study.

The Concept of Agency and the Agentic Model

The concept of agency as described by Giddens (1979) involves “intervention in a potentially malleable object world” (p. 56) and refers to a “continuous flow of conduct” (p. 55) as opposed to separate actions or a series of separate actions. More specifically, Giddens explained the role of what he termed the acting subject involved in action or
agency. According to him, “an adequate account of human agency must first be connected to a theory of acting subject; and second, must situate action in time and space as a continuous flow of conduct” (p. 2).

Giddens further expounded on the concept of the acting subject by explaining the choice of the agent at any point in time to decide between available courses of action, which he termed foundational agency. His theory also posits the idea of the intentionality feature of human behavior. The intentionality feature of human behavior means that the acting subject consciously has definite goals in mind during the course of action. It also implies that intentional monitoring of action follows rather than precedes the action and motivation to act or what he termed the reflexive monitoring of action. He states that the ability to reflexively monitor action occurs due to the “capabilities of human agents to explain why they act as they do by giving reasons for their conduct” (p. 57).

In short, a person always has agency and has the ability to act in one way as opposed to another way. However, the degree of one’s ability varies based on the situation within which the agentic ability operates. Gidden’s theoretical concept of agency supports the notion of an active agentic role in human action or the presence of choice to act otherwise at any point and time in the process of events that are taking place. Therefore, the idea of an intentionally acting subject achieving intended results is given several levels of dimension.

Based on Gidden’s (1979) notion of the “acting subject” possessing foundational agency as a “continuous flow of conduct” (p. 2), the Agentic Model as described above is the theoretical framework that guided this study. The model takes into account the
agency presented to the students within discursive situations created by school and home. The discursive situations of the students in the study were discussed in the form of support structures (e.g., family, friends, etc.) based on protective factors that students use to be academically resilient.

**Risk Factors**

Risk factors, as defined in the study, are any variables that increase the probability of a future negative outcome. Researchers agree that English language learners (ELLs) encounter several risk factors. They also agree that no individual risk factor can be considered in isolation as causing a negative outcome.

High school students in the United States face a multitude of risk factors in their social and academic lives. ELLs experience similar risk factors as their native-English-speaking counterparts as well as other risk factors that are relevant only to ELLs.

The term *risk factor* is multifaceted and has multiple definitions. However, researchers generally agree with the definition of a risk factor as a variable that increases the probability of a future negative outcome (Durlak, 1998). Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, and Lafavor (2008) simply define a risk factor as “any measurable predictor of an undesirable outcome” (p. 78). Risk factors can be demographic or social indicators such as low socioeconomic status or peer rejection, behavior like aggression, or characteristics of institutions and communities such as high quality schools (Durlak, 1998).

The literature on the influence of risk factors on the academic success of high school students suggests that combinations of risk factors contribute to poor academic performance (Durlak, 1998). These findings are important, as research has indicated that
risk factors related to lack of academic success can be internal and external or a mixture of both. Therefore, it has been suggested that both external and internal risk factors influence students’ academic performance.

In an extensive review of 1,200 prevention outcome studies in six areas of research, including academic problems, Durlak (1998) identified several risk factors that often are associated with major negative outcomes, including school failure. The risk factors were characterized into the following six groups: community, school, peer, family, individual, and other. Across the studies that Durlak (1998) reviewed, he highlighted that no negative outcome was associated with risk factors in just one group. Therefore, Durlak’s (1998) extensive review adds credence to this researcher’s belief that no individual risk factor should be viewed in isolation as causing a negative outcome.

**Risk Factors Specific to English Language Learners**

Literature on academic risk factors often compares resilient or academically successful (low-risk) to non-resilient or academically unsuccessful (high-risk) students by looking at family and individual background characteristics and classroom practices that purportedly foster resiliency. Few studies have looked specifically at potential risk factors for English language learners. Of those few studies, Hispanic students tend to be the population of students studied.

For example, Reyes and Jason (1993) conducted interviews using 52 questions designed to explore family background, family support, overall school satisfaction, and gang pressures. The participants in Reyes and Jason’s (1993) study were 48 Hispanic students in tenth grade. Reyes and Jason (1993) hypothesized that least at-risk students
would perceive higher overall family support, experience greater satisfaction with school, maintain a predominantly gang-free social group, and have more positive self-esteem compared to the most at-risk students.

Reyes and Jason (1993) used a mixed-method comparative approach, gathering their data from structured interviews and scores on the Pier-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale. Data were reported in charts using means and percentages. No quotations from participants were reported in the results, and only one quotation from a participant was used in their conclusions.

Reyes and Jason (1993) concluded that high-risk and low-risk students shared many similarities with respect to socioeconomic status and family structure. The participants came from low-income and single-parent families with the average parent education level being below fifth grade. The participants also were similar with regard to their perceptions of parental concern and parental supervision. They also found that the students’ responses were influenced by their Hispanic culture.

Additionally, Reyes and Jason (1993) reported some differences. They concluded that high-risk students were more critical of their school and complained about their teachers, the school principal, and unfair treatment by the teachers and principal. The low-risk students were more satisfied with their school and criticized teachers for their put-downs of students who “have a harder time” in school (p. 67). The researchers suggested that the successful students were better able to conform to the school’s rules and procedures, which facilitated a greater sense of satisfaction with their school.
Reyes and Jason’s (1993) research adds credence to this researcher’s belief that risk factors have a multilevel influence as well as individual, social, and contextual factors on students’ academic performance. However, their study did not include social and environmental factors, which have an impact on students’ lives and academic success. This study explored the social and environmental factors in addition to the family factors that contribute to ELLs’ academic success.

Although some research has addressed academic risk factors across diverse racial groups, less is known about risk factors specifically related to ELLs. However, research has identified being an ELL as a demographic risk factor for academic success (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2007).

Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova’s (2008) conducted a five-year longitudinal interdisciplinary and comparative immigrant adaptation study that used a mixed-method approach. While not stating a specific hypothesis, the researchers proposed to understand and explain the experiences of immigrants over time, including students’ academic performance in school.

The participants in Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova’s (2008) study were born abroad in Central America, China, Dominican Republic, Haiti, or Mexico, had parents who were born in the same country, and spoke a native language other than English upon arrival to the United States. At the beginning of their study, 407 students between the ages of nine- and fourteen-years-old were included from 51 schools in seven school districts. During the first year of the study, ethnographic participant observations and participant interviews were conducted. During the second year of the study, further
ethnographic participant observations were conducted. At the conclusion of their study, 309 students remained in the study.

Data were reported in charts as percentages. Quotations from participants, parents, and teachers were used throughout the results and conclusions reported. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova’s (2008) data showed that the role of behavioral engagement, English language proficiency, having two parental figures in the home, maternal education, and whether the father is employed are positively correlated to grades. English language proficiency levels and behavioral engagement were the most robust predictors of grade point average (GPA). They found that students who possessed stronger English skills were more likely to earn better grades and have higher GPAs. Also, students’ scores on the Bilingual Verbal Ability Tests were strongly predictive of their academic achievement.

Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova (2008) also reported that two-thirds of the participants experienced a decline in their academic performance based on their grade point averages during the five years. As a result of their data analysis, five performance pathways emerged. The students were characterized as “consistently high performers (high achievers); consistently low performers (low achievers); students whose GPA slowly drifts downward across time (slow decliners); those whose grades fall off precipitously (precipitous decliners); and students whose grades improve over time (improvers)” (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Torodova, 2008, p. 35). The high achievers or 22.5% of the students) maintained an average GPA of 3.5 across the five
years of the study. The researchers also found that girls were significantly more likely to be high achievers than boys.

Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova’s (2008) study adds credence to this researcher’s belief that those learning English have an additional risk factor that influences students’ academic performance, particularly in high school. Their study, however, did not gather and analyze the data in relation to students’ perceptions on learning English as this study did.

Other researchers have suggested that a student’s immigration status is a risk factor. For example, Perez et al. (2009) conducted a variable-focused and person-focused study to explore the influence of social, educational, and psychological experiences on 110 undocumented Latino college students.

Perez et al. (2009) used the following four measures of risk factors: working more than 20 hours per week, peer rejection due to undocumented status, low parental educational attainment, and large family size were risks. The researchers also measured students’ personal and environmental factors as well as their academic outcomes.

They concluded that 1) academic success or resilience was related to both personal and environmental resources, 2) academic performance was generally positive when various resources were available; and 3) high-risk and resilient groups suffered significantly higher levels of adversity compared to the protected group. Additionally, they found that psychosocial stressors such as undocumented status, socioeconomic hardship, and low parental education represented significant challenges for the undocumented students.
Perez et al.’s (2009) study contributes to this researcher’s belief that those who have undocumented status have an additional risk factor that influences students’ academic performance. Their study, however, did not gather and analyze the data in relation to students’ immigration statuses other than undocumented as this study planned to.

**Table 3**

*ELL Risk Factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External</th>
<th>Internal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>limited or no schooling</td>
<td>stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community</td>
<td>limited English proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigration status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Reyes & Jason, 1993; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Torodova, 2008; and Perez et al., 2009.

In summary, several researchers focused on risk factors in Latino and Hispanic students. There were no studies that identified risk factors in ELLs as a group comprised of several cultures and multiple ethnic identities. The study explored the possible risk factors that ELLs encounter with consideration given to the external and internal factors listed in Table 3.
Protective Factors

Protective factors, as defined in the study, are characteristics of the individual, family, school, and community that can change a negative outcome and foster resilience. Researchers agree that resilient students use several protective factors to be resilient. They also agree that protective factors play a key role in an individual's resilience.

Garmezy (1985, 1991) was one of the first to identify protective factors which may be operative in stressful life situations. He identified three variables as follows: modification of stressors brought about by temperament (e.g., reflectiveness in facing new situations, cognitive skills, and positive responsiveness to others), warmth, cohesion, and the presence of some caring adult (e.g., a grandparent), and the presence of a source of external support (e.g., teacher, caring agency, or church).

In addition, Werner (1995) stated that protective factors appear to transcend ethnic, social-class, and geographic barriers. She further noted that protective factors appear to make a more profound impact on those individuals who grow up in adversity than specific risk factors or stressful life events. Werner referenced the Kauai Longitudinal Study in which she studied the impact of a variety of biological and psychosocial risk factors, stressful life events, and protective factors on the development of 698 multiethnic children born in 1955. The researcher concluded that children with good coping abilities have temperamental characteristics that elicit positive responses from a wide range of caregivers.

Further, Werner noted the cross-cultural similarities of students' ability to correctly appraise stressful life events and figure out strategies as evidenced in replicated
studies of Asian-American, Caucasian, and African-American students. She further described the importance of the resilient individual's ties to members of the extended family and role models that encourage trust, autonomy, and initiative.

In general, studies on protective factors can be placed into three categories. First, there are studies that focused on the external factors and the role that these factors played in the academic success of students. Second, there are studies that focused on the internal factors and the role that these factors played. Then, there are studies that focused on the interplay of external and internal protective factors. Table 4 summarizes the main protective factors that are mentioned in the literature as they were explored in the study.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELL Protective Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>External</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peers/friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Benard, 1991; Benard, 1995; Durlak, 1998; and Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994.

**Academic Resilience**

Academic resilience, as defined in this study, is a student’s ability to effectively deal with setbacks, challenges, adversity, and pressure in the academic setting.
Researchers agree that the presence of high risk or trauma and the demonstration of positive outcomes through adaptation must exist for an individual to be resilient. They also agree that positive adaptation plays a key role in an individual's resilience.

Academic resilience refers to a students' ability to effectively deal with setbacks, challenges, adversity, and pressure in the academic setting (Martin & Marsh, 2006). A widely used definition of academic resilience is the increased likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments in spite of environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Waxman, Gray, and Padrón (2003) noted that definitions that focus on the broader educational community are often based on the positive experiences associated with positive adaptation. These experiences include forming and maintaining significant relationships, positive school perceptions, and increased school involvement.

There is some ambiguity with the term. For example, Bosworth and Earthman (2002) interviewed 10 school administrators to find out their views on resiliency. They reported that most of the administrators' definition of resiliency contained both individual and contextual factors. However, they concluded that the concept of resiliency was vague to school administrators. Furthermore, the researchers noted that how the concept is defined often dictates how that concept will be acted upon and explained how the imprecise understanding of resilience as being student-centered can thwart school-based efforts to promote resiliency.

There are various definitions of resilience. However, the variation in definitions of resilience is often grounded in the specific approach or context in which resilience is
being studied (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). For example, Waxman, Gray, and Padrón (2003) noted that "high-risk" groups were defined by a label determined by things such as poverty, family background, or abuse. They further explained that definitions that focused on the broader educational community were based in the positive experiences associated with individual adaptation such as significant relationships, school perceptions, and school involvement (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003).

Although various definitions of resilience exist in the literature; researchers generally agree that the presence of high risk or trauma and the demonstration of positive outcomes through adaptation must exist for an individual to be resilient (Garmezy, 1990; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Rutter, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982 & 1992). In this study, academic resilience is a students' ability to effectively deal with setbacks, challenges, adversity, and pressure in the academic setting with consideration given to the various cultures represented by the ELLs. In Table 5, key authors are correlated with the varying definitions of resilience.
### Table 5

**Various Definitions of Resilience and Key Authors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Key Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The demonstration of positive outcomes through adaptation in the presence of high risk or trauma.</td>
<td>Garmezy (1990); Luthar (2003); Luthar &amp; Zigler (1991); Luthar, Cicchetti, &amp; Becker (2000); Masten, Best &amp; Garmezy (1990); Masten &amp; Coatsworth (1998); Rutter (1990); Werner &amp; Smith (1982, 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process that includes individual's responses over time to challenges through positive adaptation.</td>
<td>Howard &amp; Johnson (2000); Johnson &amp; Wiechelt (2004); Luthar, Cicchetti, &amp; Becker (2000); Masten (1994) Oswald, Johnson, &amp; Howard (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process that includes individual's responses through positive adaptation and use of protective factors.</td>
<td>Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, &amp; Sawyer (2003); Oswald, Johnson, &amp; Howard (2003); Masten (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process that includes individual’s responses through positive adaptation and use of protective factors while considering cultural and diverse elements of resilience.</td>
<td>Arrington &amp; Wilson (2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Positive Adaptation

Many definitions of resilience refer to positive adaptation. Positive adaptation is the ability to adjust, maintain, or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity (Herrman, Stewart, Diaz-Granados, Berger, Jackson, & Yuen, 2011). In this study, positive adaptation is a student’s ability to adjust, maintain, or regain mental health to be academically resilient, despite experiencing adversity.

Some researchers refer to resilience as a process that includes individual’s responses over time to challenges through positive adaptation (Howard & Johnson, 2000; Johnson & Wiechlt, 2004; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 1994; Oswald, ...
Johnson, & Howard, 2003). For instance, Howard and Johnson (2000) defined resilience as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of positive adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. Likewise, Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) described resilience as a process that includes positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Johnson and Wiechelt (2004) also wrote that resilience is the positive adaptation of individuals despite risk and adversity or unexpected achievement of individuals despite stress. However, Masten (1994) recommended that the term resilience be used exclusively when referring to the maintenance of positive adaptation under challenging life conditions.

Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, and Sawyer (2003) described resilience as a dynamic process that involves an interaction between both risk and protective factors, internal and external to the individual, that act to modify the effects of an adverse life event. Likewise, Arrington and Wilson (2000) wrote that resilience is an interactional process that consists of individual characteristics and the environment and results when an individual reacts to risk factors, or vulnerabilities, that are present in their environment. They noted that resilience can be fostered by correlates or protective processes.

Moreover, Arrington and Wilson (2000) concluded that resilience has not been defined within the contextual biographies of ethnically diverse youth. This study took a closer look at academic resilience as it relates to a specific ethnically diverse population of ELLs.
Resilient versus Non-resilient English Language Learners

There are very few studies that focused on protective factors in ELLs, particularly in the United States, and how the students use them to be academically resilient. Of those few studies, most focus on the dichotomy of resilient versus non-resilient students.

For example, Alva (1991) conducted a comparative quantitative study to examine the possible reasons as to why some Hispanic students, who shared a similar sociocultural background, were academically successful and others were not. While not stating a specific hypothesis, Alva (1991) proposed that there were several protective resources that served to buffer at-risk students from the negative effects of sociocultural events that place students at risk of academic failure.

Alva (1991) administered a paper and pencil survey to 384 Hispanic students in the tenth grade. The researcher used a modified version of Hollingshead’s Two Factor Index of Social Position, the Intellectual and School Status subscale of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Inventory, Clifford’s Academic Achievement Accountability Scale, and the Hispanic Children’s Stress Inventory to construct the survey. These inventories measured sociocultural risk factors, occupational status of the students’ parents, personal resources, academic self-esteem, personal responsibility for academic performance, and the degree of stressfulness of life events (e.g., family concerns, intergroup relations, and conflicts involving language issues). None of the students was enrolled in an English as a second language (ESL) program.

The construct validity of the measures was verified using a factor analysis. Alva (1991) used incremental regression analyses to test the proportion of variance explained
by sociocultural risk factors and protective factors on students’ Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) performance and high school grades. The data were reported in charts as percentages. She (1991) also used stepwise discriminant analyses to determine which variables best differentiated the high- and low-achieving students. Data were reported in charts as percentages.

Based on the results of the incremental regression analyses, Alva (1991) concluded that protective factors contributed to students’ academic achievement and were more important than the potentially detrimental effects of sociocultural risk factors on students’ academic performance. She concluded that academically successful students were more likely to feel encouraged and prepared to attend college, enjoy attending school and being involved in school activities, experience fewer conflicts and difficulties in their interpersonal relationships with other students, and experience fewer family conflicts and difficulties.

Alva’s (1991) work adds credibility to the researcher’s belief that students’ use of protective factors plays a positive role in students’ academic performance. However, her study did not include students who were actively enrolled in an ESL program as this study did.

Similarly, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) conducted a quantitative study to examine the protective factors that contribute to students’ academic resilience and achievement. From a population of 2,169 Mexican-American high school students, they identified resilient students as students who reported that they had "mostly A's." The non-resilient students were those students who reported that their grades were "mostly D's" or "mostly
below D's." Their study included 133 resilient and 81 non-resilient Mexican-American high school students.

Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found that resilient students have significantly higher perceptions of family and peer support, teacher feedback, positive ties to school, value placed on school, peer belonging, and familism than non-resilient students. As a result, the researchers stated that family and peer support along with value placed on school were consistent predictors of academic resilience. They also found that a supportive academic environment and sense of belonging were significant predictors of resilience. The researchers concluded that cultural influences may contribute to resilient outcomes.

The study by Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) lends support to this researcher’s belief that academically resilient English language learners utilize external protective factors as well as internal protective factors to be academically successful. However, the researchers did not explore reasons why the students utilized the protector factors that they used to be academically successful as is this study did.

**Academically Resilient English Language Learners**

Generally, researchers agree that resilient students have stable relationships with peers; possess well developed problem-solving skills; consider realistic future plans; have a positive sense of being able to achieve and deal effectively with tasks; experience success in one or more areas of their lives; are able to communicate effectively; possessing a strong attachment with at least one adults; and accept responsibility for themselves and their behavior (Benard, 1993; Clarke & Clarke, 1984; Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982). However, very few studies have actually examined academic
resiliency in ELLs. Most of the resilience studies done with ELLs focused specifically on Latino or Hispanic students.

For example, Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen (2008) conducted a study of culturally diverse high school students. The researchers examined indicators of academic success that included the students’ academic motivation, academic satisfaction, and grade point average, subjective elements of student experiences, and teachers’ reports of students’ grades. Their study focused on the students' perceptions of academic support from significant others like their mothers, fathers, teachers, and friends in relation to aspects of academic success.

The researchers selected 216 students of Mexican origin from a required ninth grade course. Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen evaluated the perspectives of male (43% of participants) and female (57% of participants) students separately due to possible gender differences. They also examined nativity as a potential control variable in their study due to the conflicting findings of other studies. The majority at 65.3% of the students were born in the United States. The majority of the participants’ parents were born in Mexico (i.e., 95.8% of their mothers and 99% of their fathers).

Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen (2008) analyzed data from self-report questionnaires and teachers’ reports of grades. A table showing the mean, standard deviation, range, and internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s α) for each measure using the data was included.
The researchers found that a student's perceptions of academic support from the opposite-sex parent contributed significantly to a positive change in each of the academic indicators measured. They found that academic support from friends was significantly correlated to students' academic motivation and academic satisfaction. Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen concluded that teachers' academic support was the most salient predictor of academic satisfaction and grade point average for the resilient students.

Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen’s (2008) research adds credence to this researcher’s belief that protective factors like supportive parents and teachers play a role in students’ academic performance. However, Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen’s study focused primary on Latino students of Mexican origin. This study explored protective factors from a heterogeneous group of ELLs with consideration given to their individual ethnic identities.

In another study, Hersi (2011) conducted an in-depth cultural multiple case qualitative study of six African immigrant high school students. The primary aim of this study was to explore the factors that contribute to the resiliency of a select group of students.

The researcher's primary data sources included three 40- to 45-minute semi-structured interviews, field notes from participant observations, and shadowing each student for a day. He analyzed the data through an emergent and iterative process that involved multiple readings, organizing codes and themes into higher levels of categories within and across the interviews and observations. Furthermore, Hersi (2011) analyzed
the codes and themes to identify data related to key concepts in the research question, theoretical framework, and current research and used concept charting to identify issues requiring further attention and alternative explanations of the phenomenon studied.

He concluded that there were four factors that contributed to the resiliency of the students. Those factors were migration history, family context, educational background, and supportive school context (i.e., caring and responsive teachers).

Hersi’s (2011) study adds credence to this researcher’s belief that there are multiple internal and external factors that help English language learners be academically resilient. However, his study did not explore the internal protective factors as this study did.

**Summary**

Most studies have compared resilient and non-resilient students by looking at their family and individual background characteristics and key classroom processes (e.g., perceived learning environment and observed classroom behavior) that help foster resiliency. Some researchers have found stark differences between resilient and non-resilient students based on a variety of characteristics and personal attributes (e.g., motivation and future aspirations). However, even fewer studies have explored academic resilience qualitatively in ELLs as a diverse population of students as this study did.
III. Methodology

In this chapter, the researcher provides a statement on the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided the study. The chapter is organized into several sections that provide a framework within which the researcher describes the research plan. The chapter also includes a detailed description of the research methodology that the researcher utilized in the study. In addition, the researcher presents data collection and analysis procedures, the trustworthiness of results, and limitations for this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the researcher identified the risk factors in high school English language learners’ (ELLs’) academic and social lives and investigated ELL students’ perceptions of identified risk factors. Second, the researcher investigated protective factors that may help high school ELLs be academically successful in school. In addition, the researcher explored high school ELLs’ perceptions of these identified protective factors. Based on the key research questions, the researcher explored the ways in which students negotiate the identified risk factors and use these identified protective factors to succeed academically. As a result, the participants made meaning of the factors that they identified as those factors center around the key research questions.
Research Questions

There were two research questions that guided this study. They are as follows:

1. What risk factors were present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?

2. Which protective factors did high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?

Design

The researcher used a qualitative research design for the study. The qualitative research design best suited this type of study as the researcher intended to gain insight while concentrating on the participants’ words and actions as they responded to the interviewer’s questions. More specifically, the researcher used focus group methodology. Focus groups rely on three fundamental strengths of qualitative methods: 1) exploration and discovery, 2) context and depth; and 3) interpretation (Morgan, 1998).

General Description

The researcher used a focus group rather than individual one-on-one interviews to increase participants’ comfort level and provide group cohesion (Fern, 2001). In addition, the researcher held separate male and female focus group meetings to provide group cohesion. Group cohesion, the sense of closeness and common purpose among the participants, provided a level of comfort to encourage the focus group participants to freely participate in the discussions (Fern, 2001). In addition, holding focus groups meetings allowed the researcher to gather data on specific topics and created concentrated conversations on those topics (Morgan, 1998).
Focus group methodology provides an opportunity for participants to respond to semi-structured interview questions and participate in further discussions amongst themselves. Therefore, the use of focus groups allowed the responses to be naturalistic and allowed the researcher to understand how people feel or think about an issue or idea (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In addition, by using focus groups, the researcher was able to explore the meaning behind the students’ responses and gained insight into the students’ perceived risk and protective factors. The development of insight is a major advantage of focus group method (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Sample Selection

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select the student participants for the study. Using purposeful sampling allows the data to be interrogated purposefully so that systematic comparisons can be made (Barbour, 2001). Therefore, the participants needed to possess certain characteristics in order to take part in the focus group meetings.

This decision to control the group composition to match chosen categories of participants is called segmentation. The study participants met the following criteria: (a) were enrolled in a public high school, had completed a minimum of one year of high school in the United States, (b) were identified as an ELL enrolled in an English as a second language (ESL) program, (c) had a World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA®) English language proficiency level of two or higher in speaking based on their spring 2013 WIDA® ACCESS for ELLs® (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2014) language proficiency test results, (d) spoke Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, or Nepali as their first language, and (e) successfully completed four or
more classes that they took during the 2012-2013 school year with grades of “A,” “B,” or “C.”

In addition, the division’s education specialist was asked to identify students for the study to ensure that all potential participants had been identified. With the permission of the principal, the students’ ESL teachers or the gatekeepers were instrumental with organizing and helping the researcher share information about this study with potential student participants. Barbour (2008) states gatekeepers play a particularly important role with regard to recruiting participants in focus group studies. The ESL teachers at the schools were gatekeepers and had an established rapport with the students. In addition, they willingly agreed to assist the researcher with recruiting participants for this study.

**Focus groups participants.** The three focus group meetings were held, and a total of 9 students participated. Two groups consisted of female students, and one group had male students. When doing focus group research, it is important that group members share at least one important characteristic since the group will be the main unit of analysis (Barbour, 2008). Also, the researcher intended for the focus groups to be homogeneous in terms of background (i.e., all were non-native English speakers) and not attitudes (Morgan, 1998). The three characteristics that the focus group participants shared were their sex, status as ELLs, and academic success.

**Site selection.** The researcher conducted the study in two suburban high schools located in central Virginia. The sites were selected based on the large population of ELLs enrolled in the schools. The selected schools have the highest enrollment of ELLs in the school division. In addition, the ELL population at the selected high schools mirrored that
of the ELL population of Virginia (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). There also were several prospective student participants who spoke the most common languages in Virginia (i.e., Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese) (Virginia Department of Education, 2013).

Environment. The researcher created a non-judgmental environment for the students in the focus group. A permissive environment allows students to share their perceptions and points of views without feeling pressured to answer in a certain way (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Moreover, the focus group interviews were conducted at the students’ high schools in one of the ESL classrooms or a conference room.

Data Collection Strategies and Data Management

The researcher used questionnaires to collect demographic data prior to the focus group. The questionnaire (see Appendix C) asked questions regarding their native country, first language spoken, years of schooling in their native country and in the United States. It also contained questions about their family background (e.g., family makeup and parents'/guardians’ educational levels).

The researcher served as the focus group moderator and used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct the focus group discussions. The researcher gave all student participants an opportunity for equal participation in the focus group discussions. The researcher also used a field journal to record notes throughout the study.

A digital voice recorder was used to record the focus group discussions. The researcher transcribed the digital voice recordings within 24 hours of the end of the focus
group meeting. Using the transcriptions, the researcher used a spreadsheet to code the transcribed conversations with themes.

**Tools and Equipment**

The researcher used a digital voice recorder to record the discussions. During certain parts of the focus group meetings, the researcher used flip charts to record the participants’ responses. The chart allowed participants to see what was being recorded and gave them a chance to change or verify those comments.

After the focus groups, the researcher used the flip charts to retrieve key points. At the conclusion of the focus groups, the researcher recorded final statements, summarized comments or critical points that were discussed earlier by participants. The researcher reviewed the information on the questionnaires that the participants completed prior to the focus groups. This information was helpful to understand comments and opinions shared during the focus group. The researcher used a computer to type transcripts. In addition, the computer was used for coding the transcript.

**Procedures**

The researcher completed an application and went through the approval process to conduct the focus group study in the selected school division. After gaining permission from the local school division, the researcher contacted the educational specialist for ESL and each school’s principal to decide the best time to conduct the study. The researcher also met with prospective participants and discussed the parent/guardian consent form (see Appendix A). Once a date and time was agreed upon, the researcher conducted the
study. Those participants who received permission were asked to read and sign the youth participant assent form (see Appendix B) before participating in the study.

**Field notes.** The researcher visited the rooms where the focus group discussions were to take place ahead of time and took notes of posters, materials, or anything that could influence the content of discussion or cause offense to the participants (Barbour, 2008).

**Pilot testing of questions.** The researcher pilot tested the questions with the ESL teachers who are the gatekeepers and know the students. In addition, the researcher pilot tested the questions with ELLs who meet the specifications for being in the focus groups. With all groups, the researcher asked the questions conversationally to check the ease with which questions could be asked and responses could be given. They were asked for their feedback on the questions.

The researcher drew diagrams of the seating arrangements to help recall names of participants. The diagram also assisted the researcher in preparing complete transcripts with names of speakers.

**During the focus group interview.** The researcher served as the moderator and used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D) to lead the focus group discussion. Table 6 shows the corresponding research and interview guide questions.
**Table 6**

*Corresponding Research and Focus Group Question Guide*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What risk factors are present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?</td>
<td>Q4-Think back to your first year of high school in the United States. What kinds of changes have you made since then to be more successful in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q5-On the paper in front of you, write what helped you to make these changes. When you’re finished, we’ll share these with each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q9-Now, think about the times when you were not successful in school. What caused you not to be successful in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which protective factors do high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?</td>
<td>Q2-Describe a successful high school student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q3-When you think about being successful in high school, what comes to mind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q6-What role do others have in your success in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q7-What role do you play in your own success in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q8-Of all the things that we discussed, which one was most important to your success in school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q10-I am trying to find out what helps ESL students be successful in high school. What suggestions do you have for other ESL students who want to be more successful in school?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The entire discussions were digitally recorded. In addition, participants were provided with paper to allow them a few minutes to reflect before they offered an answer and recorded their individual lists to be shared with the group. The researcher used a flip chart to record participants’ responses. Using a listing process helped to identify duplicate items and allowed the participants some time to reflect before answering the questions (Krueger, 1998).

**Focus group meetings.** During the first meeting with possible participants, the researcher introduced the study and distributed parental/guardian consent forms (see Appendix A) to those who were interested. The researcher held three focus group meetings. Before the focus group interview, the participants were asked to read and sign the assent form and complete the questionnaire (see Appendix C). Also, the participants chose their own names or pseudonyms for the focus group discussion. During the focus group interview, the researcher used the semi-structured interview guide to explore the students’ ideas on risk factors and protective factors as they relate to their academic success.

**After the focus group meetings.** The researcher used the time immediately following the focus group meetings to check the digital voice recordings. Also, the researcher reflected on the following questions:

1. What were the most important themes or ideas discussed?
2. How did these differ from what I expected?
3. How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?
4. What points needed to be included in the report?
5. What quotes should be remembered?

6. Were there any unexpected or unanticipated findings?

7. Should I do anything different for the next focus group? (Krueger, 1998, p. 50)

All items (e.g., field notes, and other materials) from the discussions were labeled and filed. Following the completion of this study, the researcher destroyed all digital voice recordings, transcripts, and other study materials.

The researcher pilot tested the questions to ensure that participants would understand them. The researcher attempted to provide conditions needed for free and open sharing. The researcher listened carefully to participants, observed how they answered, and sought clarification on areas of ambiguity. At the end of the focus group discussions, the researcher asked participants to verify the summary of comments.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using some of the key characteristics of focus group analysis. Those characteristics included a disciplined process, systematic steps, a defined protocol, verifiable results, and multiple feedback loops (Krueger, 1998). When using focus group interviews, analysis begins with the first focus group and continues after the focus group ends (Krueger, 1998). Therefore, analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, and the research plan guided and focused the analysis.

Systematic Analysis

First, the researcher designed the sequence of the interview guide questions to allow for maximum insight. Therefore, participants were allowed to become more
familiar with the topic, given an opportunity to recollect personal opinions, and listen to others’ opinions. The researcher asked key questions that related to the core topic of interest. A final summary question for each participant followed those key questions.

Second, the researcher collected and handled the data in a systematic way. The researcher also recorded the focus group interviews and kept field notes to be able to reconstruct crucial parts of the focus group discussions. Third, once data were collected, the researcher coded them. After multiple readings of the transcripts, the researcher labeled ideas or themes each time they emerged or appeared. A spreadsheet was used to code and store the transcribed data in themes. Use of axial coding allowed the researcher to selectively retrieve and review the information based on codes and combinations of codes, and reassemble it differently from the original version (Krueger, 1998). Fourth, the researcher verified key points with the participants to ensure that the intent of each participant was adequately understood. This participant verification was done by giving the participants a chance to respond to the moderator’s summary of key points while still in the focus group meeting. Last, the researcher debriefed immediately following the focus group interviews and captured the first impressions and highlights of the meeting.

Verifiable

The data analysis of the study was verifiable through the trail of evidence (Krueger, 1998). The evidence comprised of field notes, recordings of the focus group interviews, oral summaries of key points during the focus group meetings, the debriefing after the interviews, and the interview transcripts.
Considerations

**Words, context, and internal consistency.** The researcher analyzed the similarity between the words and their meanings using the symbolic interactionist approach, which emphasizes the active construction of meaning (Barbour, 2001). Also, the researcher paid attention to the tone and intensity of the discussion (i.e., not just the transcribed words). In addition, the researcher analyzed group interaction and individual voices within discussions as each focus group participant can be described with reference to many related characteristics (e.g., varying ages, social classes, prior educational levels, etc.) (Barbour, 2008). The researcher paid close attention to whether or not participants’ changed their opinions during the interviews and found out what was influencing the change.

**Comments.** Participants’ comments were viewed in light of frequency, extensiveness, intensity, and specificity. Also, the researcher considered what participants did not say. Frequency of comments refers to the number of times that a concept or topic surfaces in the discussion (Krueger, 1998). Extensiveness of comments is measured by how many participants talked about a particular issue (Krueger, 1998). Intensity can mean the passion or depth of feeling used by a participant talking about a topic as noted by a noticeable change in speaking patterns (Krueger, 1998). Specificity refers to the participants’ sharing of first-hand experiences.

**Transcript-Based Analysis**

The researcher identified emergent themes by listening to the transcripts of the focus group interviews, using field notes, and reviewing post-focus group notes. The
researcher applied the constant comparative method to compare the views and experiences of the participants. Using the constant comparative method allowed subtle but potentially important differences to be illuminated (Barbour, 2001). Also, the researcher analyzed the discussions for inconsistencies and contradictions to identify the opinions, ideas, or feelings that repeat.

**Trustworthiness of Results**

While quantitative research relies on measures of reliability and validity to evaluate the utility of a study, qualitative research is evaluated by its “trustworthiness.” The researcher did several things to ensure that the results are trustworthy. In seminal work in the 1980s, Guba and Lincoln substituted reliability and validity with the parallel concept of “trustworthiness,” containing four aspects: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability. Specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative rigor, such as the audit trail, member checks when coding, categorizing, or confirming results with participants, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, structural corroboration, and referential material adequacy were within those four aspects (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility**

Truth-value or credibility of conclusions in a qualitative study is analogous to the concept of internal validity in quantitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman (1994), research results should be scrutinized according to the following basic questions: (1) Do the conclusions make sense? (2) Do the conclusions adequately describe the study participants’ perspectives? and (3) Do the
conclusions authentically represent the phenomena under study? The researcher relied on student participant checks to enhance credibility. I also relied on triangulation to enhance credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is the corroboration of results with alternative sources of data. I also obtained data from documents to provide a background. The researcher examined these documents to help verify particular details that participants supplied to enhance the credibility of this study’s results (Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative studies is similar to the concept of external validity in quantitative studies. It seeks to determine if the results can be transferred or related to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher sought to enhance transferability by providing a thick, rich description of the contexts, perspectives, and findings that encapsulated the student participants’ experiences. By providing such detail (i.e., with the help of a detailed field log and journal) to draw a well-defined context, the researcher affords readers the opportunity to decide whether or not the results are transferable to other circumstances.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability in qualitative research is similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research. It refers to whether or not the results of a study are consistent over time and across researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Confirmability in qualitative research is similar to the concept of objectivity (Shenton, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Shenton (2004), confirmability is the
process of attesting that the data is supported and coherent. It assumes that the findings are reflective of the participants’ perspectives based on the data, as opposed to being a reflection of my own perceptions or bias.

To enhance the dependability and confirmability of this study, the researcher had an inquiry audit conducted. The auditor examined documentation and a running account of the process of this study. This person also examined the process of the inquiry and determined its acceptability. In addition, the auditor examined the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations. Furthermore, the auditor attested that it is supported by data and is internally coherent.

**Limitations**

As with any study, the data that were provided in this study need to be interpreted within the context of certain limitations. The researched identified two limitations. First, conducting the focus group meetings in English is one limitation in this study. Participants in this study were non-native speakers of English. It was possible, because English was not their first language, they experienced difficulty with sharing and expressing their ideas in English that they would not have if the focus group meetings were conducted in their native languages.

Second, another limitation is the setting for the focus group meetings. There is no such thing as a “neutral” setting for a focus group. It is possible that the school setting had an effect on the content of the data generated. Two focus group meetings took place in a familiar ESL teacher’s large classroom, and the other meeting took place in an
unfamiliar, small conference room. Factors such as the size of the room can affect the focus group discussion (Fern, 2001).

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher described the methods and procedures that comprised the research protocol utilized for this study. This chapter introduced and described the overall research design protocol. The protocol addressed sampling procedures, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. In addition, the researcher specified issues related to the trustworthiness of results and a limitation of the findings.
IV. Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the focus group meetings as they relate to the following two research questions that guided this study:

1. What risk factors are present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?

2. Which protective factors do high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?

The chapter consists of two main sections. First, participant profiles were created to introduce the participants who shared their ideas and aided in this study. Also, a summary of group characteristics is included. The second section presents themes as they emerged from the data analysis of participants’ responses to the key research questions. In the last part, emerging themes that the researcher observed are discussed.

**Student Participant Profiles**

As a result of the in-depth focus group meetings, document analyses, and the use of a field journal, the following student participant profiles emerged. The profiles represent a brief introduction to the English language learners who are successful in school and provide a brief background picture of who they are. All participants selected their own names to use during the focus group meetings. Some names had sentimental
value to the participants, and others were spur-of-the-moment choices. Many of the names that they selected were similar to their real names, which would make it easy to identify them. In order to protect the identity of each participant, the researcher has created fictitious names to replace the participants’ focus group meeting names.

1. **Ammon**, an assertive 15-year-old sophomore, is an Arabic-speaking level 4 student. He started school when he was 6 years old and attended school in his home country of Egypt for 4 years before coming to the United States. During the focus group meeting, he often tried to aid other member’s with conveying their thoughts and tended to try to dominate the conversation.

2. **Arturo**, a reflective 17-year-old junior, is a Spanish-speaking level 4 student. He started school when he was 5 years old and attended school in his home country of El Salvador for 8 years before coming to the United States. He maintained a laid back demeanor during the entire focus group meeting and often appeared to think before he spoke.

3. **Faiza**, a genial 16-year-old sophomore, is an Arabic-speaking level 1 student with a speaking proficiency of level 2. She started school when she was 7 years old and attended school in Egypt and in her home country of Sudan, where she attended school for only a year. During the focus group meeting, she was attentive and eager to share her ideas, even though she sometimes had difficulty expressing them in English.

4. **Jahi**, an affable 16-year-old junior, is an Arabic-speaking level 3 student who also speaks some French. He started school when he was 4 years old and attended school in his home country of Egypt for 11 years before coming to the United States. He was
quite reflective and at times was truly passionate sharing his ideas during the focus
group meeting.

5. **Miaya**, a reserved 16-year-old sophomore, is a Nepali-speaking level 3 student. She
started school when she was 6 years old and could not recall how many years she
went to school in her home country of Nepal. At the beginning of the focus group
meeting, she discussed her ideas freely and with ease, but near the end of the meeting
she had difficulty conveying her ideas in English and her participation seemed to
wane.

6. **Nabeeha**, a down-to-earth 17-year-old sophomore, is an Arabic-speaking level 4
student. She started school when she was 5 years old and attended school in her home
country of Iraq for 6 years before coming to the United States. She was an active and
eager participant in the focus group meeting and noticeably uses the African
American Vernacular English dialect when speaking.

7. **Thanh**, a hesitant 15-year-old freshman, is a Vietnamese-speaking level 2 student.
She started school when she was 6 years old and attended school in her home country
of Vietnam for 9 years before coming to the United States. During the focus group
meeting, she was somewhat quiet and seemed distracted by my note-taking.

8. **Valentina**, a bubbly 16-year-old junior, is a Spanish-speaking level 3 student. She
started school when she was 4 years old and attended school in her home country of
Colombia for 12 years before coming to the United States. During the focus group
meeting, she conversed freely and seemed to really enjoy the opportunity to share her
ideas and listen to other group members’ ideas.
9. **Wafiq**, an enthusiastic 15-year old sophomore, is an Arabic-speaking level 4 student. He started school when he was 6 years old and attended school in Jordan for 6 years before coming to the United States. He seemed to enjoy participating in the meeting and was quite attentive to what other group members shared during the focus group meeting.

**Summary of Group Characteristics**

This section presents more details regarding the characteristics of the participants in this study. High school transcripts and student questionnaires (see Appendix C) provided more background information and were used to aid the analysis of the data gathered.

The student participants (a) were enrolled in a public high school, (b) had completed a minimum of one year of high school in the United States, (c) were enrolled in an ESL program, (d) had a World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA®) English language proficiency level of two or higher in speaking, (e) spoke Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, or Nepali as their first language, and (f) successfully completed four or more of their classes that they took during the 2012-2013 school year with grades of “A,” “B,” or “C.”

**Thematic Analysis**

Data analysis procedures commenced once the interview data were converted from digital voice recordings to transcribed texts. Data reduction began with the reading and re-reading of the transcribed data. The themes began to emerge with the initial reading of each transcript. Next, an open coding procedure was used to identify emergent
themes. The four emergent themes developed as follows: 1) importance of learning English, 2) maintaining and/or establishing positive relationships with parents, friends, and teachers, 3) implementing good study habits, and 4) possessing inner qualities, such as hope and resilience to be successful in school.

In addition to these themes, the data suggested the existence of patterns and categories. These patterns and categories indicated that the students’ perceptions were often two-fold: the perception of being successful required certain actions on their part as well as the perception that they were unsuccessful in the past due to their own inaction. These perceptions were obvious in their focus group discussions. The development of themes as described by the participants provides thick descriptions of their perceptions of protective factors that helped them be academically successful in high school along with the risk factors that academically hindered them in the past.

The student participants used many resources to overcome their at-risk status of being English language learners (ELLs) to be academically resilient. Throughout the focus group meetings, the participants consistently shared that they often relied on external protective factors (e.g., parents/relatives, teachers, and friends) as well as internal protective factors (e.g., good study habits, will to learn English, and inner qualities like being resilient). The pages that follow present perceptions expressed by the participants and are the major findings and themes that emerged accordingly with each research question.
The participants’ quotes are written as they were spoken to capture their authentic voices as English language learners. The quotes are presented in this fashion to afford the reader an opportunity to draw on the reflection of thought given to each participant’s responses.

**Risk Factors**

Focus group members reported that several risk factors were present in their academic and social lives. Primarily, they discussed their lack of English language ability and low expectations of teachers. They less often mentioned other possible risk factors (e.g., the inability to form new relationships, stress, and their inattentiveness) that made them academically unsuccessful in the past and caused them to implement changes.

**Lack of English Language Skills**

When asked about their first year in school in the United States, Ammon vividly remembers learning a “new language.” Likewise, Arturo explained, “When I come to this country, it was horrible, because I did not understand what other people say, and now, I understand, and I can spoke another language.” He further elaborated that he spent his first year and half of his second year really focusing on learning English. Valentina also expressed having difficulty in her first year of school in the United States due to her lack of English language skills. She stated the following:

Uh, well my first day was really horrible. I was really shy like to speak English, but now I have changed, like now I can do it. So, I think that
helped me ‘cause I try to study not just in the school—in my house or with my friends….

When asked what prevented their success in class, Ammon immediately answered, “um, the language.” Jahi promptly stated, “I agree with him.” Ammon further expounded the necessity for ELLs to learn English, “because if you don’t know the language, how will you know how to speak and how would you understand?” According to Ammon, not knowing English and failing in school were interrelated. He matter-of-factly reiterated, “Yeah, like if you don’t know the language, then you won’t try ‘cause you won’t understand it.”

Similarly, Valentina shared her ideas about being unsuccessful in school by saying that speaking English in front of others (i.e., oral presentations) was difficult. She also mentioned the need to “try to be…expressive.” Valentina mentioned that she had difficulty due to her shyness and said, “Yeah, ‘cause I’m shy…so if I’m talking in front of the people, like many people, I used to freeze.” Nabeeha also shared her difficulty with speaking English in front of her English-speaking peers: “Uh the first presentation…yeah, it’s like the um it’s just so hard to present in front of all these people. It’s like you going to get horror at times like it’s just so hard.” When asked to further explain her fear of public speaking, she did not wholly attribute her fear to her lack of English skills. She replied,

Not for me it’s not really (due to the language alone) maybe for some people, because they be afraid that they laugh at them, but not for me. It just that I’m scared. I don’t know. I’m just scared.
Low Teacher Expectations

One focus group meeting revealed how teachers’ low expectations of students who do not speak English very well may be a cause for their past failures. Ammon stated, “Like if you’re new, then they don’t expect you to work hard.” Jahi agreed with Ammon’s statement about teachers and stated, “They did not expect much.” Ammon went on to elaborate that with changes (e.g., improved English language skills, writing or speaking better in English) teachers’ attitudes changed. He said, “Like when you stopped writing mistake that made them happy.”

Other Risk Factors

The student participants mentioned several risk factors that were discussed during their individual focus group meetings. However, these risk factors did not emerge across the groups nor were they discussed in each of the groups. These themes include the following: the inability to form positive relationships, stress, and inattentiveness.

The inability to form new relationships. Wafiq called attention to his inability to form relationships with others as a possible hindrance to his past academic success. He said that “not trying…to meet new people.” He felt that lack of motivation directly contributed to his past failures.

Stress. Faiza also mentioned being stressed and having to take a quiz or test and not doing well as a factor in past failures. She shared the following:

I feeling bad like I have something wrong in my life like this, and it scare me, and I take a test or a quiz, and I get a zero. I scared to show my
mother…my father; maybe, they will tell me, “Why you don’t understand?”

Why you don’t do that?

Another member in the group nodded in agreement with Faiza’s previous statement.

**Inattentiveness.** “When you don’t pay attention to the teacher” is what Faiza explained as a contributing factor that resulted in her past failure. Faiza was the only focus group member to mention inattentiveness as a factor to her past failure.

**Protective Factors**

The high school ELLs in the focus groups used several protective factors to be academically resilient. Their protective factors include the following: learning English, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, establishing and implementing good study habits, and possessing certain inner qualities.

**Learning English**

Members of all of the focus groups discussed the importance of learning English and how it is essential to their academic success, particularly in their content area classes. Thanh noted with both Faiza and Miaya firmly agreeing with her, “We need to learn more English. It’s like every subject is English.” When asked about the changes that they made to increase their English language skills, some participants mentioned speaking with native English-speaking people and not speaking their native language as much. More specifically, Valentina said, “Em, speaking with American people, and eh, try to speak like frequently English not too much my own language.” She also laughingly mentioned, “Eh, do not be shy speaking English.” Nabeeha agreed with the need to learn and use more English and stated the following: “Uh, I be like talking and don’t be afraid.”
And I be playing with friends so that I can learn and know about them and try to learn English.” Miaya also stated that “to learn English…” was one of the things that she changed to be more successful in school.

**Establishing and Maintaining Positive Relationships**

Students in all three focus groups discussed the important role that others play in their success in school. Several themes emerged from the analyses of the discussions. The main themes that emerged from the discussion centered on their positive relationships with their parents or relatives, teachers, friends, and other people.

**Parents, relatives, and other people.** In every focus group meeting, the participants discussed the importance of the role that their parents, relatives, and other people play in their success in school. Wafiq shared how he gets assistance from his parents. He said, “I ask them for help.” Jahi explained that his father is the reason why tries to succeed in school. He said, “My father was successful in school. So, I’ve got to do what he did.” Jahi also said, “My father just says, you know what you have to do.” He explained that his father encourages him to do well in school. Miaya shared that her mother inspires her to do well. She stated that “she challenge me to do to make a future. She wants to make me nurse.”

When Valentina first arrived, she stated that her parents helped to increase her English language proficiency by exposing her to more English instead of her native language. She explained, “...they try to show me just like more listen English and music. They don’t let me like to speak Spanish like just for the first year.” She also expressed
how she has a cousin who helps her with English. She said, “My cousin...yeah she lived here for many years like 18 years, uh, she helped me a lot to speak English.”

Nabeeha mentioned multiple people who have helped her be successful in school. She shared that her parents also encourage her to do well in school. As she explained, “…they push me forward ‘cause they say um you can do it, because I really believed I couldn’t do [sic]. So, they told me that I could do it.” She also stated that a family friend inspired her to do well, too. “And my dad’s friend, he’s American. He’s like the first person we know. So, he pushed me forward. He’s like if you go to school, you’ve got to make friends, and you can do it.” Her older brother was a great help to her as well. She expressed that her brother knew English and encouraged her when he told her “we’re going to learn English together.”

Thanh shared that her family has future goals of being better off economically and encourages her to do better in school. She said, “…when we come here, we have no money, no place, so I want my family is going better.” She shared her father’s advice for her by stating the following:

My dad say that I need to be like my aunt and uncle. They have a good job. I want to, because I want to my family don’t want to be like that. My family is have some like is not good now.

Faiza also discussed how her parents encourage her to do well and plan for her future. She said the following:

My mother, they will say to me like work very hard in school, like they want me to do a good future in my life and something like that. Be maybe
a doctor. They say to me study hard and do the work something like that.

My sisters, my brother, my aunt and my uncle...they say to me also.

Faiza shared how praise from people in general helps her do better. She stated, “It’s like you feel so happy or something like that. If someone say to you that you are doing well in school, like you feeling happy and you gonna do the best and the best.” Thanh agreed by saying, “It’s like people feel like it make me happy and then it make me feel I do my best in my subject.”

Teachers. Participants in two of the focus group meetings discussed the role that their teachers played in their success; however, students in one focus group did not mention their teachers at all. Jahi described his first day of going to school in the United States as “horrible.” However, he elaborates on “the second day, I get closer to my my teachers and friends and that helped me.” He also shared how his teachers treated him was important to his success. He described his English as a second language (ESL) teacher as “very kind.” Jahi said, “He can talk to new students. Other teachers, they think that I’m stupid.”

Valentina mentioned her ESL teacher. She explained, “She was my ESL 1 teacher, and she helped me a lot. Like reading books.” Nabeeha excitedly talked about her former teachers and how they helped her feel more comfortable doing oral presentations. “Well, my seventh-grade teacher. She like...she really want me like to present, because I was really afraid to go out and present.” Nabeeha shared that her teacher taught English and math and gave them assignments that helped improve their English language skills. She stated, “Uh, she just um like, she always give us homework
and to do it and give us like always she give us an essay to go write it and go out to
present it. Nabeeha also mentioned her ESL teacher from last year. She shared, “She
like...she really teached me stuff.”

Wafiq also spoke highly of his teachers and shared that they were most important
to his success in school. He said that “teachers...especially ESL teachers” were
particularly helpful. He acknowledged that “they know that we don’t speak English very
well.” Arturo agreed by saying, “And they can help us. They help us a lot because they
know that uh English is not our first language. That’s what I think.” Ammon agreed with
the others about the importance of teachers, but he noted that friends were important, too.
Nabeeha expressed the same opinion as Ammon. She shared that her first day went well.

My day was like really good ‘cause all my friends was like I don’t really
know them, but they just helped me, the teacher helped me to get through
it. Like she teached me how to speak English really good. So, it was good.

**Friends.** The importance of having friends was discussed in each of the focus
group meetings. According to Ammon, teachers along “good friends” were most
important to his success. He explained that “good friends” were “smart and intelligent.”

When asked about changes that they made to be more successful in school, Wafiq
gladly volunteered that he “made new friends that speaks English.” Wafiq also stated that
he “makes friends that know the same language, but they know English, too, so that they
can help.” Ammon added to the discussion by saying, “I got close to new friends, and
they taught me English. He further explained that his friends “learned English” like him
(i.e., his friends were also ELLs).
Valentina also mentioned how her friends play a role in her academic success and noted a difference between her American and Spanish friends. She shared, “Like, I have Spanish friends and American people, but my Spanish friends; they they try like to study with me.” Likewise, Thanh communicated the need to make friends and explained that she sometimes seeks assistance from her Vietnamese-speaking friends. She stated, “I just like want to find some friends. Uh, it’s like same my age, same like, uh, my country. When I have some problems, I can ask for [sic]. She will say in Vietnamese for me so I can [sic].” Furthermore, Faiza discussed making friends with ELLs. She said “to have the best grade, you have to make friends or help you something like that...I have friends that speak Arabic like me. And I have a friend that speaks Spanish, Nepali, and English.” She also noted how friends could be helpful in her content area classes. She said, “I will say that I want to make friends to help me, but I uh like help in the hard class like World History, like Algebra....”

**Establishing and Implementing Good Study Habits**

The importance of establishing and implementing good study habits was discussed in all of the focus group meetings. When asked to describe a successful student, the participants immediately described people who possess good study habits (e.g., studying, being organized, paying attention, performing well on assignments, etc.). Ammon provided the following description: “Someone uh studying really hard, doing their work and studying before for getting a quiz or a test.” Later on during the discussion, he reiterated the necessity of reviewing notes and described what he does, “I get all my notebooks in every class and go over them.”
Arturo simply describe someone who is academically successful as “paying attention in the classes and that’s all.” Likewise, Thanh said, “Pay attention. Try to do my homework and classwork very well.” After reflecting during the focus group meeting, Arturo added that a successful student has to “be the best…with good grades.” He continued, “You have to say, uh, all the answer...like the right answer and you have to study hard....” Valentina shared similar ideas about a successful student and said, “Try to be the best student. Uh, study hard like getting good grades.” Furthermore, Nabeeha agreed with Valentina’s ideas. She stated, “I go with her idea...it’s like a person who like really smart and try their hard to get like out of high school to go to college.”

Nabeeha described what she does to be successful, “Like I work hard and study after school and try to work with other people who is from other countries.” She further explained how to reach goals and be successful. She said, “Work hard. Um, if you want to succeed, you need to work hard so that you can get to your goal. So it is like the key to success is to like work hard to get to your dream.” Ammon, Valentina, Thanh, and Miaya also agreed that “working hard” was essential to their success.

**Possessing Certain Inner or External Qualities**

All focus groups shared and attributed their academic success to inner qualities unique to themselves as individuals. The most commonly mentioned internal protector factor was their strong interpersonal skills. Internal factors like internal locus of control and strong self-efficacy skills were less commonly discussed qualities. A few student participants mentioned other factors, such as good luck (i.e., an external factor) and innate characteristics like being talented, intelligent, or clever.
**Strong interpersonal skills.** Student participants in all three focus group meetings discussed the importance of having strong interpersonal skills or skills they used to interact with other people to help them build school-based relationships. In order to get to know others and form positive relationships, Arturo said that “your personality” should be “a good one.”

Thanh, Faiza, and Valentina mentioned the benefits of possessing a collectivistic personality and being friendly and kind to other students. Thanh expressed, “It’s like I need to be friendly, share things, and like [sic] ask them to help me in English and that’s it.” Faiza shared how she approaches other students who she would like to get to know, “Like first thing…I asked them about their name. They asked me, and where are they from, something like that.” Valentina described how her friendliness to others helps her individually. She explained why one needed to “be friendly ‘cause if you are friendly with other people, people will help you.”

Nabeeha expressed that she enjoyed working collaboratively. She explained her reasoning below:

> Uh, my personality, it just make me like I don’t like when the teacher tell me to work by myself. I really don’t like it. I like to work with different people so I can like get the idea, so I can get it.

Valentina agreed with Nabeeha and expounded that she likes to share and work with others as follows:

> Yeah, it’s like the same thing, ‘cause I like to share so I think that it help me ‘cause I wanted to speak with people in English and also the same
thing that I’m hard with myself like I want to do the right thing like if I want to learn English I do it so that helps me.

**Strong self-efficacy skills.** Valentina and Jahi shared their beliefs in their own abilities to be successful in school or self-efficacy. Jahi described a successful student’s attitude by sharing, “He has to say he can…Yeah, like uh Thomas Edison when he failed many times like after 99 times; finally, he succeeded.” Valentina discussed the pressure that she places on herself to be successful in school. She said,

Eh, I try to be hard with myself ’cause like when I have a goal in my mind I try to like do it right. So I like to do the right things and I like to just live like that now. I try to be hard with myself like study...yeah.

**Internal locus of control.** Jahi was the only student who mentioned determination and hope or described an internal locus of control (i.e., the belief that life events can be influenced by one’s attitude, preparation, or attitude) to be successful in school. He further explained why “hope” was important to helping him make changes. He said, “Hope. I always say hope. I always say that because sometimes I will not find my teachers again in my life. So, I have to have hope.” For him, hope is something that aids him with his “determination to be good to get to the top…."

**Other protective factors.** Arturo expressed that a successful student “has to say his opinion or something like that.” Jahi also shared his thoughts of a successful student. He said, “…he has to good luck in school.” In addition, Miaya described a successful student as someone who is “talented,” “cleaver,” and “intelligent.”
Emerging Themes

Choosing to Be Academically Resilient

It was clear that students in all of the focus groups experienced both success and failure while enrolled in U.S. high school and chose to be more academically resilient in school. Regardless of what caused their past failure, the students took ownership of their shortcomings (e.g., lack of English language skills, not taking the initiative to form relationships with their teachers and other students, etc.) and did not blame others for their failure. Therefore, they consciously decided on a course of action to change their behavior to be more successful, especially after reflecting (i.e., albeit unconsciously or consciously) and finding out some of the root causes of their failures.

Based on the findings, a student’s choice of resilience to promote his or her own success was apparent. According to Jahi, a successful student has to “say he can.” He went on to explain how a person should never give up, “Yeah, like uh, Thomas Edison when he failed many times. Like after 99 times finally he succeeded.” Nabeeha mentioned that a successful student is “really smart and try their hard to get like out of high school to go to college.” Thanh and Faiza mentioned the need to “work hard.” Ammon discussed how his parents set an example that he wanted to follow to be successful. He said, “My father was successful in school. So, I’ve got to do what he did.” Valentina echoed the same sentiments and shared that a successful student “should try to be the best.” Jahi’s statement best summarizes this theme with his description of a successful student’s “hope.” He described what “hope” means to him, “I have the determination to be good to get to the top.”
Actively Seeking Sources of Help

During all focus group meetings, the student participants acknowledged that they needed help and could not be successful alone or without the help of others. As a result, they actively sought others who could help them be more successful. The students possessed the ability to know when they needed help and to ask for it. Teachers, parents, relatives, friends, and other students were those from whom they oftentimes sought help. Also, it did not matter if the people were native and nonnative English speakers. The students were resourceful in seeking help from anyone that they felt would be able to help them. In addition, many students mentioned that it was a collectivistic relationship in which they shared information and garnered information from the people who helped them, especially their friends and other students.

The findings revealed that students sought help from multiple sources. Faiza mentioned how she made friends with the specific purpose of getting help with difficult classes. “I want to make friends to help me, but I uh like help in the hard class like World History, like Algebra….” Thanh reiterated her idea of forming friends for the explicit purpose of getting help, too. She said the following:

I just like want to find some friends, uh, it’s like same my age, same like, uh, my country. When I have some problems, I can ask for and she will say in Vietnamese for me so I can understand….

Faiza also mentioned seeking help from her teachers, “If you don’t understand something in class, ask a teacher.” Wafiq stated that “teachers…especially ESL teachers” were resourceful. He explained, “They know that we don’t speak English very well.” Arturo
agreed and further explained, “They help us a lot, because they know that, uh, English is not our first language. That’s what I think.” “My teachers, my friends, my parents,” is how Jahi summarized who he seeks help from to be successful in school.

Summary

This chapter included data analysis procedures as well as student participant profiles to allow readers a characterization of the participants who took part in this study. It also included a presentation of findings that were drawn from the analysis of data. Those findings revealed that several risk factors such as lack of English language ability, low expectations of teachers, inability to form new relationships, stress, and inattentiveness prevented students from being successful. In addition, the students discussed how several protective factors like learning English, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, establishing and implementing good study habits, and possessing certain inner qualities helped them be academically resilient. Last, two themes emerged from the findings. They were students (1) choosing to be academically resilient and (2) actively seeking sources of help.
V. Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose of this study and the key research questions. Next, a discussion of the significant findings their relationship to the agentic theory and the literature is presented. Also, implications and recommendations for practice, especially for secondary educators, are suggested. Last, recommendations for future research are included.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the risk factors that English language learners (ELLs) experience in high school and discover which protective factors those ELLs use to be academically resilient. Based on the key research questions, the researcher considered how the students negotiate the identified risk factors and use the identified protective factors to succeed academically. To achieve this purpose, focus group meetings were held with academically resilient students who were English language learners in high school. The focus group guide questions were designed to answer the essential questions that guided this qualitative study.

**Research Questions**

Two essential research questions guided this study. Those questions are as follows:

1. What risk factors are present in high school English language learners’ academic and social lives?
2. Which protective factors do high school English language learners use to be academically resilient?

**Discussions of Findings and Research**

The review of literature for this study consisted of three sections as follows: the agentic model and concept of agency, risk factors, and protective factors as they relate to academic resilience. These discussions relate the findings of the study to each of the areas. This section is organized around the literature, study findings, and new information not found in the literature.

**The Concept of Agency and the Agentic Model**

Based on Gidden’s (1979) notion of the “acting subject” possessing foundational agency as a “continuous flow of conduct” (p. 2), the Agentic Model was the theoretical framework that guided this study. The concept of agency as described by Giddens (1979) involves “intervention in a potentially malleable object world” (p. 56) and refers to a “continuous flow of conduct” (p. 55) as opposed to separate actions or a series of separate actions. More specifically, Giddens explained the role of what he termed the *acting subject involved in action or agency* or the choice of the agent at any point in time to decide between available courses of action called *foundational agency*.

His theory also posits the idea of the intentionality feature of human behavior, which means that the acting subject consciously has definite goals in mind during the course of action. It also implies that intentional monitoring of action follows rather than precedes the action and motivation to act or what he termed the *reflexive monitoring of action*. He states that the ability to reflexively monitor action occurs due to the
“capabilities of human agents to explain why they act as they do by giving reasons for their conduct” (p. 57).

The data from this study revealed that the student participants demonstrated foundational agency as evidenced by their focus group discussions that centered on how they made choices or actively decided to change their habits to be more successful in school. Students did not describe separate actions as helping them become more successful in school. Instead, they mentioned several external as well as internal protective factors. They also shared that certain behaviors or risk factors negatively impacted their academic success and described how they made changes to get positive results. In addition, when the students discussed their goal to be more successful in school, it was clear that they demonstrated reflexive monitoring of action. The students were able to articulate as ELLs and give reasons that explained why they changed their behavior to be more successful in school.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher created Figure 4 to depict the cyclical nature of agency as it relates to academic resilience. As noted in Figure 4, agency or the student’s ability to make a choice regarding failing or being resilient and succumbing to risk factors or using protective factors is central to the agentic cycle of academic resilience. A student who employs agency uses protective factors to be academically resilient as evidenced in the findings of this study. Figure 4 also shows that a student may be faced with risk factors that could result in failure or the use of protective factors through one’s agency. Based on the findings of this study, students discussed their constant negotiation between assessing their situations (e.g., risk factors or failure) and
implementing a plan of action via the use of protective factors to avoid failure or overcome it to be academically resilient.

Figure 4. Abrams-Terry’s Agentic Cycle of Academic Resilience.

The agentic model also takes into account the agency presented to the students within discursive situations created by school and home. The data revealed that the discursive situations of the students in the study were discussed in the form of support structures. The support structures mentioned by the students include family, friends, and teachers and were the external protective factors that students use to be academically resilient. However, the student participants did not discuss protective factors such as community and religious organizations and employment that are mentioned in the literature (Garmezy; 1985, 1991).
The ELLs in the focus groups were quite aware of their academic standing and took many actions to rectify or maintain their success. They were able to gauge when something was not working and figured out what they needed to do to try to make it work. All the while, they may not have been able to articulate this process in English very well, but they were aware.

**Risk Factors**

The student participants in this study identified and shared their ideas about several risk factors (e.g., not possessing good study habits, strong oral presentation skills, lack of English language skills, etc.) that were included in the literature. During the focus group meetings, the students failed to discuss some risk factors (e.g., community and peer risk factors) that are found throughout the literature. On the other hand, the findings revealed that teachers’ low expectations were a risk factors; one not discussed in the literature on ELLs and academic resilience.

Reyes and Jason (1993) suggested that the successful students were better able to conform to the school’s rules and procedures, which facilitated a greater sense of satisfaction with their school. The findings from this study show how students were able to conform to the school’s procedures. Based on the focus group discussions, students mentioned the need for improving their study habits, reviewing their notes, and organizing their notebooks to be more successful, particularly in their content area classes.

According to Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Torodova’s (2008) study, English language proficiency levels and behavioral engagement were the greatest
predictors of grade point average (GPA). They found that students who possessed stronger English skills were more likely to earn better grades. This study included students who had one year of high school which made it impossible to track their GPA over several years. However, the findings of this study revealed that the students’ lack of English skills was the most discussed risk factor in all of the focus group meetings. The students definitely realized that increasing their English skills was essential to their academic success.

Perez et al. (2009) concluded that academic success or resilience was related to both personal and environmental resources. They also found that academic performance was generally positive when various resources were available. The students in this study attributed their success to personal and environmental resources. The findings suggested that they preferred to seek help from people like their teachers, parents, and friends. Based on the focus group discussion, the students oftentimes sought the resources on their own.

Durlak (1998) identified several risk factors that often are associated with major negative outcomes, including school failure. The risk factors were characterized into the following six groups: community, school, peer, family, individual, and other. Based on findings from this study, the students mentioned most of the risk factors as having contributed to their past academic failure. However, even after probing, the risk factors of community, family, and peer never emerged as possible causes of failure for the students in this study.
An additional risk factor not explicitly addressed by literature on ELLs and resilience that emerged from the findings of this study is teachers’ low expectations. Two student participants discussed how teachers did not expect much of them academically when they first arrived in the U.S. One student stated when comparing his understanding ESL teacher with other teachers, “Other teachers they think that I’m stupid.” Another member in the same focus group shared at a later time in the discussion that he felt that teachers do not expect much from newcomers. He said, “Like if you’re new then they don’t expect you to work hard.” These students’ statements further iterate how teachers who have low expectations or do not think ELLs can perform in their classes can possibly negatively impact these students’ academic success.

**Trauma and ELLs**

Although trauma was not specifically addressed as one of the risk factors that ELLs encountered in this study, the researcher feels that it is important to note. Some ELLs, who represent all levels of the literacy spectrum, have experienced significant trauma (e.g., wars, natural disasters, dramatic poverty, or other major impacting stressors) in their lives (Zacharian & Hayes, 2012). Zacarian and Haynes (2012) note that “trauma is an integral part of their lives and deeply affects their capacity to learn and develop socially and emotionally in the way that students do when they have not experienced these disruptions.” Therefore, their traumatic experiences may add to the increased complexity of them being academically resilient in school.
Protective Factors

The student participants in this study identified and discussed their ideas about several protective factors (e.g., increasing their English language proficiency, reaching out to others like teachers, parents, and students, etc.) that were included in the literature. During the focus group meetings, the students failed to discuss some protective factors (e.g., religious and community organizations) that are found throughout the literature. However, the fact that the participants primary focus on protective factors revealed the value and importance to their academic success in high school.

Garmezy (1985 & 1991) identified protective factors which may be operative in stressful life situations, the presence of some caring adult, and the presence of a source of external support. Based on the findings of this study, the students discussed how they reacted to new situations that included being in a U.S. school, unable to speak English well, and not having many friends. They also primarily discussed how they modified the stressor of lack of English language skills, sought the assistance of a caring adult (e.g., a parent or relative), and received external support from teachers, especially their ESL teachers.

Waxman, Gray, and Padrón (2003) noted that definitions of academic resilience as they relate to the broader educational community are often based on the positive experiences associated with positive adaptation. These experiences include forming and maintaining significant relationships, holding positive school perceptions, and increased school involvement. The student participants discussed the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with their teachers, held positive perceptions about
school despite past failures and low expectations from some teachers. However, the students in the focus groups did not discuss their involvement in school activities like sports or clubs. However, they consistently reported that they were attentive, focused, and worked hard on being engaged during school.

Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, and Sawyer (2003) described resilience as a dynamic process that involves an interaction between both risk and protective factors, internal and external to the individual, that act to modify the effects of an adverse life event. Based on the findings of this study, this dynamic process of risk and protective factors interacting is confirmed. The students in all of the focus group meetings identified and discussed how lacking English language skills was a risk factor. They also stated that increasing their English language skills was a protective factor that they used to be successful in school. In addition, their discussion about not forming relationships (i.e., risk factor) and the need to form relationships (i.e., protective factor) demonstrated this dynamic process.

Alva (1991) concluded that protective factors contributed to students’ academic achievement and were more important than the potentially detrimental effects of sociocultural risk factors on students’ academic performance. She stated that academically successful students were more likely to feel encouraged and prepared to attend college, enjoy attending school and being involved in school activities, experience fewer conflicts and difficulties in their interpersonal relationships with other students, and experience fewer family conflicts and difficulties. Based on the findings, the students in all of the focus groups named their positive relationships with parents, teachers, and
friends as the most important to their success. Due to their positive feelings about school and their academic success, some students even mentioned their future career plans and goals of furthering their education after high school during the focus group meetings.

Similarly, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found that resilient students have significantly higher perceptions of family and peer support, teacher feedback, positive ties to school, value placed on school, peer belonging, and familism than non-resilient students. The findings from this study reiterated their findings. The students were quite receptive to their teachers' and parents' feedback and expectations as well as other students’ thoughts (i.e., both positive and negative).

To this group of student participants, people (e.g., parents, teachers, friends, and relatives) as well as themselves as individuals played the most important role to their success in school. They were able to reflect on their academic and social lives. They also were able to navigate the educational system in a limited way (i.e., they knew with whom they needed to form relationships and what they needed to do in a basic sense) to be academically resilient.

**Recommendations for Practice**

In an effort to address the contributions of this study, the findings give needed background information to secondary educators of ELLs. Results based on this study indicate several important recommendations for ways in which educators can better meet the academic and social needs of ELLs.

Based on the findings of this study as they relate to the theoretical framework, educators should respect and value students' assessments of their own academic and
social needs. Their actions would include allowing students to discover their learning styles and openly share their academic concerns as well as helping students with goal setting, self-reflection activities, etc. It also would mean that educators would need to provide opportunities to support or guide students once the students determine what changes they need to make to be more successful in school.

Another recommendation is based on the students’ central discussion of not knowing enough English as a risk factor to being academically resilient. Some ELLs may need more language support than what they currently receive, especially as newcomers to the United States. In all of the focus groups, the students mentioned their lack of English language skills as a major cause of their past failure. As a result, educators could consider providing more language support for newcomers by providing quality ESL programs, writing centers to help with their English literacy skills, and tutoring, regardless of their English language proficiency level.

Due to the findings regarding the multiple protective factors that the students discussed, there are many recommendations that could be made. First, educators could seek to include and build upon parent-school and teacher-student relationships by implementing more inclusive parent involvement opportunities for ESL families and establishing effective teacher-student mentoring programs. Likewise, they could encourage and provide ways for students to form relationships with others through school-based programs (e.g., clubs and peer helper programs to help students develop themselves academically and socially).
Second, educators could foster and continue to support the growth of the students’ academic skills by providing students with additional opportunities to hone their study skills, get in touch with or meet other students (i.e., both ELLs and native speakers). Also, based on the findings, it may be advantageous to find ways for students to become more involved with community-based services and programs (e.g., religious organizations and community sports leagues).

Last, educators should stress the importance of holding all students to high standards, regardless of the students’ English language proficiency levels. The students in this study were quite aware of those teachers who had little to no expectations of them because of their low English language proficiency.

**Recommendations for Research**

Based on the agency theory, one area to research would involve how to make students more aware of their agency and ability to exact change in their academic and social lives. Also, it may prove fruitful to explore effective ways to motivate students to make changes to be more successful after facing academic failure.

For the students in this study, lack of English skills was discussed as a primary risk factor that prevented them from being academically resilient. Further research should be done to find out what type of on-going language support ELLs would benefit most from, particularly if they already have a higher proficiency level of English. In addition, it would be advantageous to conduct focus group studies which explore the risk factor of trauma as it specifically relates to ELLs. Furthermore, it would be useful to explore the
risk factors and protective factors experienced by groups of students who experienced trauma and compare them to students who did not.

Based on the findings regarding protective factors, it would be beneficial to explore how ELLs select and use their personal resources to be successful as another possible area to research. The students had rich discussions about the external and internal protective factors that were instrumental to ensuring their success in high school.

**Conclusions**

The use of qualitative methodology was beneficial to exploring the perceptions of the student participants’ experience with failure due to risk factors and success via protective factors. Focus group meetings were conducted with the student participants of the study, and a semi-structured discussion guide was used to encourage the students to explore their perceptions of academic failure and success as it relates to them as individuals.

The thoughtful and rich discussions of the students produced an increased awareness of how they became more successful in high school, even as English language learners. They describe times when they failed and provided honest, thoughtful, and introspective reasons for their failure. They also happily discussed their success and shared their ideas on how they were able to overcome their past failures.

In an effort to understand how some ELLs overcome failure to be academically resilient in high school, it is important to appropriately assess and see the value that protective factors hold for individual students, particularly as it relates to their academic and social lives. The conclusions of this study resulted in a deeper, more comprehensive
understanding of what some ELLs want and need to be successful in school. The findings may help to explore instructional and programmatic practices that encourage excellence in academics for all students regardless of their English language abilities.
List of References


Appendix A

Parental/Guardian Permission Form

TITLE: Academically Resilient English Language Learners: A Focus Group Study Exploring Risk Factors and Protective Factors

VCU IRB NO.: 

If any information contained in this permission form is not clear, please ask the study contact under “Questions” to explain any information that you do not fully understand. You may think about or discuss this consent form with family or friends before making your decision.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this research study is to find out what helps English language learners be successful in high school.

You are being asked to give permission for your child to participate in a discussion group for a research study because he/she is an English language learner who attends the selected school for this study.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR CHILD’S INVOLVEMENT
In this study, your child will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire about his/her native language, and previous education before coming to the United States. The questionnaire should take less than 15 minutes. Your child will attend one group meeting that will last about one hour. He/she will be in a group of 4 to 6 other teenagers. In this meeting your child will be asked to talk about things like school and activities outside of school as well as his/her friends, teachers, and family. The meetings will be digitally recorded to get everyone’s ideas. Names will not be recorded digitally.

If you decide to allow your child to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this permission form. Do not sign the form until you have all your questions answered.

RISKS
Sometimes people become uncomfortable talking in front of a group and fear what others think. This may cause limited amounts of stress and anxiety. For this reason, the meeting
will start off with activities to help your child feel comfortable with the other participants and the moderator. There also will be a few basic rules for the group that will promote respect between all of the participants. He/she does not have to talk about anything he/she does not want to talk about. He/she also can leave the group at any time.

**BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**
Your child may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information that I learn from this study may help adults find ways to help English language learners do better in school.

**COSTS**
There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time your child will spend in the group and filling out a questionnaire.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
Potentially identifiable information about your child will consist of a questionnaire, meeting notes, and a digital recording of the meeting. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your child’s data will be identified by pseudonyms, not real names. Data or summarized results will not be released in any way that could identify your child. The group sessions will be digitally recorded, but no names will be recorded. At the beginning of the session, all members will be asked to use initials only so that no names are recorded. After the digitally recorded discussions have been transcribed and there is no longer a need for the audio recordings, all the digital voice recordings will be destroyed. The questionnaires and meeting notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet for six months after the study ends and will be destroyed at that time. No data will be kept indefinitely. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel.

I will not tell anyone the answers your child gives me; however, information from the study and the parental/guardian consent form signed by you may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes by Virginia Commonwealth University.

What I find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your child’s name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
Your child does not have to participate in this study. If you allow him/her to participate, she/he may stop at any time without any penalty. He/she may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

**QUESTIONS**
If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your child’s participation in this research study, contact:

**Researcher:** Michelle Abrams-Terry
Phone Number: (XXX) XXX-XXXX
E-mail: mnabrams2@mymail.vcu.edu
and/or
Research Director: Dr. Cheri Magill
Phone Number: (804) 828-9805
E-mail: ccmagill@vcu.edu

The researcher named above is the best person(s) to call for questions about your child’s participation in this study.
If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

Office of Research
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000
P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298
Telephone: (804) 827-2157

Contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or if you wish to talk with someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm.

**PERMISSION**

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing for my child to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to allow him/her to participate.

______________________________________________
Name of Child

_______________________________________________
Name of Parent or Legal Guardian
(Printed)

_______________________________________________
Parent or Legal Guardian Signature Date

_______________________________________________
Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above) Date
Youth Participant Assent Form

TITLE: Academically Resilient English Language Learners: A Focus Group Study Exploring Risk Factors and Protective Factors

VCU IRB NO.: 

This form may have some words that you do not know. Please ask someone to explain any words that you do not know. You may take home a copy of this form to think about and talk to your parents/guardians about before you decide if you want to be in this study.

What is this study about?
The purpose of this study is to find out what helps English language learners be successful in high school. The study will also try to find out what things may prevent English language learners from being successful in high school. The study may help adults find ways to help English language learners do better in school.

What will happen to me if I choose to be in this study?
In this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire about yourself, native language, and previous education before coming to the United States. The questionnaire should take less than 15 minutes. You will attend one group meeting that will last about one hour. You will be in a group of 4 to 6 other teenagers. In this meeting you will be asked to talk about things like school and activities outside of school as well as your friends, teachers, and family. The meetings will be digitally recorded to get everyone’s ideas. Names will not be recorded digitally.

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this form. Do not sign the form until you have all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

What might happen if I am in this study?
Sometimes people become uncomfortable talking in front of a group and fear what others think. This may cause limited amounts of stress and anxiety. For this reason, the meeting will start off with activities to help you feel comfortable with one another and the
moderator. You do not have to talk about anything you do not want to talk about. You also can leave the group at any time.

**Will you tell anyone what I say?**
I will not tell anyone the answers you give us. I will not share your answers with your teachers or parents/guardians or friends. However, other members of your group will know what you say. If I talk about this study in speeches or in writing, I will never use your name.

**Do I have to be in this study?**
You do not have to be in this study. If you choose to be in the study you may stop at any time. No one will blame you or criticize if you drop out of the study.

**Questions**
If you have questions about being in this study, you can talk to the following person or you can have your parent/guardian or another adult call:

Michelle Abrams-Terry at (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Do not sign this form if you have any questions. Be sure someone answers your questions.

**Assent:**
I have read this form. I understand the information about this study. I am willing to be in this study.

[ ] Participant verbally agrees to participate in this study.

[ ] Participant verbally disagrees to participate in this study.

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Conducting Informed Assent Discussion/Witness

______________________________________________
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Assent Discussion/Witness Date

______________________________________________
Principal Investigator Signature Date
Appendix C

Student Questionnaire

Focus Group Name (Not Your Real or Nickname):

Please answer the following questions:

1. What languages do you speak?
2. What language did you first learn to speak?
3. What is your home country?
   a. Were you born in your home country?
      i. If you were not born in your home country, where were you born?
4. Did you live in any other countries before coming to the U.S.?
   a. If so, where?
5. Did you attend school in your native country?
   a. Did you go to school in any other countries before coming to the U.S.?
      i. If so, where?
   b. Did you go to school in any other states before coming to Virginia?
      i. If so, which state?
6. How old were you when you started school?
7. How many years did you go to school in your home country?
8. Do you live with your parents?
   a. If yes, do you live with both your mother and father or just one parent?
9. What is the highest level of education completed by your parents (circle only one under each)?
   a. Mother
      i. Grade school
ii. High school
iii. College

b. Father
   i. Grade school
   ii. High school
   iii. College

10. What kind of jobs do your parents have or do for a living?
   a. Mother:
   b. Father:

11. Do you have any brothers and/or sisters?
   a. If yes, how many?
      i. Are you the youngest, oldest, or middle child?
Appendix D

Interview Question Guide

Hi, and welcome to our group. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about success in school. My name is Michelle Abrams-Terry, and I am a graduate student at VCU. I want to know how ESL students become successful in school. I’ve invited students to share their thoughts and ideas. You were selected because you are all students who are successful in school. I am interested in what you have to say because you are ESL students who do well in school.

Today we’ll be discussing your thoughts and ideas about success in school. I basically want to know what you do to be successful in school and what has prevented you from being successful in school. There are no wrong answers. Please feel free to share your ideas even if they are different from what others have said. Keep in mind that I am interested in all the things that you have to say.

Before we begin, let me suggest some things that will make our discussion more productive. Please speak up—only one person should talk at a time. I’m digitally recording the session because I don’t want to miss any of your comments. I’ll be on a first-name basis, and in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and listen. I won’t be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. We’ll be discussing 12 questions, and I’ll be moving the discussion from one question to the next. There is a tendency in these discussions for some people to talk a lot and some people not to say much. But it is important for us to hear from each of you because you have different experiences. So if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren’t saying much, I may ask for your opinion. I’ve placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other’s names. Let’s begin. Let’s find out some more about each other by going around the table.

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<th>Date of Focus Group</th>
<th>Location of Focus Group</th>
<th>Number and Description of Participants</th>
<th>Moderator Name</th>
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Interview Question Guide

Opening Question
Q1. Tell us your name and your favorite memory of last summer.

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Comments/Observations

Introductory Question
Q2. Describe a successful high school student.

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Comments/Observations

Transition Questions
Q3. When you think about being successful in school, what comes to mind?

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Comments/Observations
Q4. Think back to your first year of school in the United States. What kinds of changes have you made since then to be more successful in school?

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Key Questions
Q5. On the paper in front of you, write what helped you to make these changes. When you’re finished, we’ll share these with each other.

AFTER A SHORT DELAY, SAY:
Let’s go around the table, and I will make a list of these changes.

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AFTER THE LIST HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON THE FLIP CHART, ASK:

Q6. What role do others have in your success in school?
LISTEN FOR:
- friends, family members, parent involvement, parents’ education
- teachers, teacher expectations
- religious organizations, extracurricular activities, part-time job

PROBE IF NECESSARY

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Comments/Observations

Q7. What role do you play in your own success in school?
LISTEN FOR:
- your personal goals, plans for college/future, expectations, ability to get along with others

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Comments/Observations

Q8. Of all the things that we discussed, which one is most important to your success in school?

FOLLOW-UP:
- What makes them most important?
Q9. Now, think about times when you were not successful in school. What caused you not to be successful in school?

**FOLLOW-UP:**
- What did you do to overcome those things that interfered with your success in school?

**PROBE IF NECESSARY**

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Ending Questions

Q10. I am trying to find out what helps ESL students be successful in high school. What suggestions do you have for other ESL students who want to be more successful in school?

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Q11. Let me summarize the key points of our discussion. 
GIVE A BRIEF TWO-MINUTE SUMMARY.

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Q12. Does this summary sound complete? Do I need to make any changes?

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Probe Questions (use them sparingly and always consider potential usefulness of information): Would you explain further?/Can you give me an example?/Would you say more?/Is there anything else?/Please describe what you mean./I don’t understand.
Vita

MICHELLE N. ABRAMS-TERRY

Birthplace
Richmond, Virginia

Education
Virginia Commonwealth University—Richmond, VA
Ph. D. —2014 Major: Education

The Pennsylvania State University—University Park, PA
Master of Arts—1997 Major: German

The College of William and Mary—Williamsburg, VA
Bachelor of Arts—1994 Major: German

The University of Mary Washington—Fredericksburg, VA
Postgraduate Professional Certificate—2004
Concentration: Teaching English as a Second Language

Universität Flensburg—Flensburg, Germany
Penn State Education Abroad Program—1995-1996
Concentration: German and Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Licensure
Commonwealth of Virginia Postgraduate Professional (PreK-12):
Administration and Supervision, English, English as a Second Language, & German

Professional Experience

Higher Education

George Mason University—Fairfax, VA
College of Education and Human Development: FAST TRAIN Programs
2004-2012 Adjunct Instructor

The George Washington University—Washington, DC
National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs (NCELA)
2009 Senior Research Associate
**University of Mary Washington**—Fredericksburg, VA  
College of Graduate and Professional Studies  
2008-2009   Adjunct Instructor

**Virginia Commonwealth University**—Richmond, VA  
School of World Studies  
1997-2002   Adjunct Instructor

**K-12 Public Schools**

1997-present  **Classroom Teacher**  
Henrico County Public Schools, Henrico, VA

2005-2008  **Henrico County Public Schools Staff Development Presenter**  
Department of Staff Development, Henrico County, VA

**Ph.D. Externship**  
Summer 2007  **Virginia Department of Education**  
Office of Program Accountability and Administration

**Publication**  
Abrams, M. N. (2009, Winter). The Nation’s English Language Learners Count: Highlights of  

**Conference Presentation**  
Summer 2006  **Leadership Academy Conference Presenter**  
Henrico County Public Schools

**Professional Development**

**Service**

Fall 2006  Member of Plain English Math Test Form Review Committee  
Virginia Department of Education

Spring 2006  Member of English Language Proficiency Standards Committee  
Virginia Department of Education

Fall 2004  Member of Reading Committee  
Henrico County Public Schools

Summer 1999-2003  ESL and German Curriculum Writer  
Henrico County Public Schools