A Phenomenological Perspective of Educating Students at the Matt Garcia Learning Center: Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development and Relationship Building Development Skills

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A Phenomenological Perspective of Educating Students at the Matt Garcia Learning Center: Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development and Relationship Building Development Skills

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Abstract

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Drexel University, February 2013

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The professional educators of Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC) have undertaken a monumental task of providing education to students considered to be significantly at-risk in a public school of choice. These educators are focusing on quelling the negative success trajectory prevalent for each of the students of MGLC. Understanding the perceptions of these educators regarding their ability to create positive changes in the lives of students at MGLC is an important component in further understanding the successes occurring at MGLC. The purpose of this study was to gain insight of the professional educators’ perceptions of their efforts and strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships.

The following questions guided the current research study: 1) How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the strategies they use to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building skills? 2) What perceptions do the professional educators of MGLC have of the effectiveness of these approaches? 3) How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the lessons learned about these approaches, and how might those lessons inform future strategies to assist students at MGLC? A phenomenological research design was employed. Participants consisted of eight certificated educators who have provided direct service to the students of MGLC. Data were gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews, observation, and review of artifacts.

The study included six major findings: 1) Passionate Belief in the Power of People, 2) Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference, 3) A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders, 4) Communication is an Essential Element, 5) Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone, and 6) It’s a Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes. Results of the study included: 1) The successes that occur at MGLC every day may not be noticeable to many, but nevertheless, the significance of each small success, which is incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds further opportunities for student transformation; 2) The professional education staff of MGLC engages in extensive, intentional, purposeful strategies to connect and communicate with students; 3) The
professional education staff at MGLC is committed to applying consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support students in finding success; and 4) Developing, opening, and implementing MGLC to meet the needs of an evolving at-risk student population has been an extremely challenging endeavor, but one well worth the effort.

The study conclusions were: 1) The professional educators at MGLC display intentional and purposeful actions with clear communicative focus attached to actionable behaviors with specific and targeted goals of initiating success for students; 2) The significance of recognizing each small success, which is incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds opportunities for student transformation and is described as an important characteristic of the MGLC; and 3) Creating MGLC has been a process that, though challenging, has been well worth the effort given the successes being realized by students and the evolution of the staff as a unified collegial unit. Recommendations for actionable improvements to MGLC, for the broader educational community contemplating initiating such a school, and for future research are made.
Dedication

To My Love: Nancy Martinez

I cannot convey to you enough how much I appreciate, love, and cherish you. You have been a constant source of love, support and encouragement to me through our many years together. You are my best friend, and I could never imagine going through this life without you by my side. You hold my heart in your hands each day, and provide a caring touch with each passing moment. I would have never become the man, father or educator that I am today if you were not in my life. I love you deeply and forever.

To My Boys: Matthew Martinez, Andrew Martinez,

Vincent Martinez and Christopher Martinez

Though both your mother and I were your first teachers, you each continually provided me lessons about life, love, compassion, nurturing, and patience. Each of you is unique, each of you is amazing, and each of you holds a unique and special place in my heart, mind and soul. Through the laughter, the tears, the camaraderie, the silliness, the music, the athletics, the art, the craziness, and even the lazy days, my moments spent with each of you are cherished times that I will never forget. I relish the days ahead to see you each mature, grow, develop, find your successes and continue to expand your personal horizons. No matter what your position, your job, or your status in life you will forever be my boys and I love you all so very much.

To My Mom and Dad: Rose and Eugene Martinez

Mom, my first teacher, I love and miss you dearly. Your spirit lives on. I recall the care you displayed to so many, even though we did not have so much. Your willingness to help those who were in need, to passionately love your family, and to enjoy life are characteristics that I hold onto as distant, yet strong memories of our time together.

Dad, my father, I know that you believe in me and are proud of my success. You were ever the most loyal employee, who always strove to keep his responsibilities for caring for his family as his highest priority. I appreciate your stamina and dedication to work, your commitment to performance, and your love and support of my family.

To My Brothers and Sister: Tomas Martinez, Ph.D., George Martinez,

Patricia Hughes, and Henry Martinez

Tom, you blazed a trail for us all, never gave up no matter the odds, and have served as a tremendous inspiration to me as a loving caring man. I have always appreciated your kindness, compassion, and caring for others, no matter who you were speaking to, who they were or what they did, you see people first, as individuals to be loved and respected. I strive to be like you.
George, you took me in when there was no other door open. You cared for me, ensured my safety during a difficult time, and provided so many lessons that could never be repaid. You continue to be a living lesson in daily persistence, stamina and resilience. You have a zeal for life and a true appreciation of each moment that we have in this life. I appreciate so much all that you have done for me, and I love you as a father.

Patricia, you taught me how to read, you challenged the status quo, and you were never afraid to try something new and different. Your personal journey is an amazing story, and serves as yet another inspiring story of courage, stamina, and of overcoming adversity. I appreciate your love, encouragement and support during my entire life.

Henry, you have overcome your personal share of adversity, and through your actions you are dedicating your life to being a positive, loving, father to your children, and an exceptional, caring, grandfather to your grandchildren. I appreciate your journey of self-discovery and know that you will find peace in your personal quest.

To My In-Laws: Paul and Geneva Chiabotti

Paul and Geneva, your love and support through the years has been tremendously appreciated. You have seen me transform from a self-doubting teen, with seemingly random direction, into the man you know today, who I believe you are proud to call your son. I could never imagine not having the opportunity to know you as a son and could not have imagined the blessings that you would bring to my life. You have provided love and guidance to me, and offered me the ultimate trust to care for your daughter. All that you have provided for my family and me will never be forgotten.
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The journey towards completion of this research project began many years before my admittance into Drexel University. Instilled in me by family members, teachers that provided me support and encouragement, educators that I have known along the way, colleagues that have provided to me exceptional examples of qualities of life-long educators, has been a dedication to seek to support broadening opportunities for students of all kinds, especially those that have been marginalized. Having the opportunity to then actually conduct this research study, work through the analysis, interpretation, and result development phases, to write and rewrite then write again, and to reach conclusions that will hopefully be impactful for the greater good of society, could not have been accomplished without the support of so many.

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in turn, my research study and its results, respectively. I consider you a dear friend, and colleague.

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Finally, I wish to thank the participants of the study, the professional educators of MGLC. It is through their willingness to offer their collective lived experiences for analysis for this study that I was able to more fully understand the level of dedication and determination that is being given to the students at MGLC on a daily basis. Your stamina, never-say-never attitude, and passion for supporting the most at-risk students as
they seek to transform their lives is a true testament to teachers everywhere who strive to not only teach students, but teach students to become well functioning adults in society.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

What is it that keeps students coming to school? Is it the curriculum, friends, teachers, or possibly the relationships a student develops at school with school staff that fosters resiliency within that child and supports that child to develop into a responsible adult, thus sustaining the student’s attendance each day? What if the student has displayed major behavior problems, has found little or no success with academics, and has found limited success in making connections with fellow students, teachers, or, for that matter, anyone else at school? Does it go to reason that there is even more of a need for someone, an educator perhaps, to strive to focus on fostering resiliency, support responsibility development, and build relationships with these students? Is it within the province of a public school setting to initiate and sustain positive engagement with these students to halt the negative success trajectory that seems to be their predetermined destiny?

Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC) was developed with a specific intent: to provide a high level of academic curriculum, through positive behavior systems and strategies, and to include community agency supports to provide these types of services to at-risk students. MGLC was designed with a student-centered approach to student development to change the presumed negative success trajectory for each child coming to the school. The designed focus for the school staff is to meet and address the identified challenges for students within this public school setting and to assist each child with empowering themselves to excel.
Statement of the Problem to Be Researched

Currently unknown are MGLC professional educators’ perceptions of their efforts and strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

By purposeful design, the MGLC seeks to incorporate the best in instructional strategies and focuses on implementing strategies to assist students with building relationships with other students as a necessary and important component to sustaining students’ attendance within the public school system. This phenomenological study sought to describe MGLC professional educators’ perceptions of their efforts and strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships.

When students find limited success in school, drop out of school, or find themselves in a spiral of educational defeat, the negative impact to society at the local, state, and national level is severe (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). A redirection of our educational resources to provide new opportunities for students at all levels should become a new norm for society. Given the prevailing lack of success that has befallen many students within public schools, the question is asked: What will it take to change the negative success trajectory for our at-risk students with regard to keeping them in school through graduation?

Changes to schools, changes to curriculum delivery, and changes to interactions with students that seek to engage and sustain students with the public school system are needed in all public schools (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). This study reviewed the local
impact of MGLC that, at its core, is aligning its resources on fostering resiliency, targeting responsibility development and forging positive relationships for students at risk. By purposeful action, through well-conceived ideas, by conscious implementation of interventions and strategies, MGLC is seeking to change the anticipated negative success trajectory that some segments of society might say is unavoidable for at-risk students. The latent potential to be resilient is being ignited by the staff within the MGLC. This study reviewed the perceptions of the staff with regard to how effective they have been in response to these goals and sought to understand the impacts of the efforts of the staff over the last two years.

Research Questions

This study focused on answering the following questions:

1. How do the professional educators of MGLC describe strategies they use to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building?

2. What perceptions do the professional educators of MGLC have of the effectiveness of these approaches?

3. How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the lessons learned about these approaches, and how might those lessons inform future strategies to assist students at MGLC?
The Conceptual Framework

Researcher’s Stance

This researcher believes meaning can be developed by bringing the collective views, perceptions, and understandings of individuals into a collective understanding that can be shared with others. This social constructivism view is recognized by this researcher and was thoughtfully considered when choosing to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This researcher further believes the multiple perceptions of individuals collected via data gathering can be utilized to ascertain a glimpse of reality as it stands and develop a collective experience that can be understood by others. The ontological perspective held by this researcher further directed the focus of this data collection and propelled the desire of this researcher to provide a broader understanding of the data to others so they could gain perspective of the school. By explaining the reality as it existed based on the participant interviews, the focus is on expanding the knowledge of other educators who might be searching to expand educational opportunities for students historically marginalized and often provided limited options for advancing their academic pursuits. Further, through the use of interviews, the researcher hoped to provide information to others with regard to positive practices and areas of challenge experienced by the interview participants. This researcher holds a pragmatistic view and believes that even though programs like MGLC may seem ill-fated to some, the need for such programs to be successful and benefit our society could more than pay for itself with the positive changes occurring for its students.
Every person has the latent ability to be resilient, develop the skills of responsibility, and advance their ability to build relationships with others. However, given the experiences and opportunities each individual is provided, that latent ability could either be engaged or could remain disengaged by the educational system in which he or she is enrolled, thus leading to either success or a lack of success for each individual student. The life experiences I endured at an early age might be seen as a list of excuses for potential lack of success in school: loss of a parent at age 13, difficult relationship with remaining parent, left home at age 16 to live with a sibling, attended three different high schools, worked full-time since the age 17, and limited extended family support structure in place during significant developmental years. However,
during these personally trying times, I continued to attend public schools, graduated high school in four years of attendance, and continued my education by attending a community college prior to transferring and graduating from the University of California, Davis. I remember, not so much by name or face, but by collective effort, the guidance and nurturing provided me by caring instructors at each high school I attended. In addition, I remember a number of experiences I had at elementary and middle schools as positive and enjoyable, which I believe provided me with some significant early foundational experiences fostering my personal resiliency development, understanding of responsibility, and my ability to build relationships.

In essence, I believe many of the relationships I had with school personnel provided an opportunity to develop responsibility skills and to tap into my latent ability to be resilient. Frankly, I believe I was able to draw upon these personal connections for strength, which helped foster my personal resiliency and kept me attached to school without ever considering dropping out. In some respects, it was these relationships that sustained my academic pursuits through my college years. I wonder to what end I might have resulted if my instructors had not taken the time to connect with me, offer support, invest in relationships with me, and specifically assist me in fostering my own resiliency and responsibility. Through conscious application or not, I believe my personal academic success was kindled by many of these relationships through the years.

At this point in my life, 25 years as an educator, as the doors were readied to open for MGLC, I was extremely optimistic about the potential for this school to change the course of many students’ lives. Knowing the staff had sought to support, assist, guide, and teach students; foster resiliency; develop personal responsibility; and build
relationships with students had rekindled a passion in me to study these issues. I had been engaged in a non-direct, yet supportive role of the principal, the staff, and even the educational foundation that supported the school. As this phenomenological study began, I sought to place my personal bias on hold, suspend my personal judgment, to collect the data within the context of a blank slate, and to recognize the experiences as they were reported by the staff.

Princiotta (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009), currently the Director of Education Innovation and Results at United Way Worldwide and the lead author for “Achieving Graduation For All, A Governor’s Guide to Dropout and Prevention,” suggested to state leaders four guiding principles for righting the course of dropout rates: “a) promoting high school graduation for all,” “b) targeting youth who are at risk,” “c) re-engaging youth who have left the system,” and “d) providing rigorous and relevant options for earning a high school diploma” (pp. 4-5). The four principles are detailed and suggested as primary foci for governors as they seek to change the crisis at hand, which has been measured to cost well over $300 billion in lost wages to the national economy. The lack of success pervading our public school system has become a national tragedy reverberating in cracks to the foundation of schools from coast to coast. Could it be that a significant change to our education practices should occur? Should it be that more of a focus on fostering students’ personal resiliency, enhancing the responsibility skills, and their ability to build relationships is needed?

A number of alternative education programs have been initiated with a focus on stemming this tide of dropouts. Independent study programs, continuation schools, community day schools, and even distance learning programs have met with a variety of
save-rate successes, meaning the percentage of students who end up continuing in school to either a GED, completion of certification, or graduation, when they may have otherwise dropped out of school. Though the save-rates may demonstrate some students are returning to school systems to continue their education, the question continues to be asked: Could public education help more students if each students’ personal resiliency was increased through strategies implemented to foster that resiliency if each students’ personal responsibility development were a focus of their education, and if building positive relationships with others was an expected skill to be developed?

Matt Garcia Learning Center, a public school of choice, is being developed in alignment with the four principles to combat the dropout rate as detailed by Princiotto and Reyna (2009). Additionally, the specific design of MGLC was contemplated through discussions held by the Superintendent’s Cabinet and by the development team that created the curriculum, site vision, and mission. One of the goals was to strive to stave off the idea of dropping out from each and every student’s options by ensuring success for each student through a focus on resiliency building, enhancing personal responsibility, and developing students’ abilities to build relationships. Specific strategies to support the development of students are being implemented to increase the opportunities for students to connect with school staff through purposeful and conscientious conversations. The professional education staff is seeking to implement positive purposeful approaches and instruct and engage students in an artful and thoughtful manner that is hoped to increase a web of connections for each student. As an alternative public school of choice, MGLC has sought to provide a unique comprehensive
school experience for students within a public school setting and offers this model as a new approach that may be replicated in other communities.

**Conceptual Framework of Three Research Streams**

The three research streams for this dissertation project include Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development, and Relationship Building Development. These three components of development are seen as being complimentary to one another and are being considered as paramount skill areas for students to fully benefit from educational resources being presented to them. While it is true that many students may seemingly succeed within public education settings where no specific educational programs that target resiliency, responsibility, or relationship-building skills are being provided and offered, this researcher would argue that embedded within that educational setting lay these components. Further, this researcher believes MGLC, a school designed to support at-risk students, may be able to benefit from a redesign of the current education program to better support students. By including more specific research-based strategies to support students’ resiliency development, by using a more focused approach to increase students’ personal responsibilities, and by engaging with parents in a more thoughtful manner to enhance relationship-building skills of students and their families, more opportunities for student success will flourish.
Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the Matt Garcia Learning Center.

Definition of Terms

Negative Success Trajectory

Diminishing returns in a student’s academic success, social development, grade attainment, and abilities to demonstrate resiliency, responsibility, and relationship-building skills.
Relationship Building

Healthy human beings tend to engage with their social surroundings in a positive manner, interact in the give and take we commonly recognize as being part of life, and participate in the sustainability of relationships in their environments.

Resiliency

That quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems that they are at greater risk of experiencing.

Responsibility

For the purposes of this study, responsibility is not stringently defined, as many meanings are held by many people. However, developing social responsibility, personal responsibility, or if you will, developing a moral compass with which to self-lead, may all be components of what it means to be responsible.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

This study was developed with the following assumptions: (a) the development of MGLC was accomplished with the positive intent to provide educational opportunities to a marginalized population of students; (b) the selected focus areas of resiliency, personal responsibility development, and building personal interpersonal relationships are essential elements required by students to succeed in public education; (c) the data collected will accurately demonstrate the perspectives of the professional educators who have supported the school since its inception; and (d) the importance of school design
includes selecting foundational principles upon which to build a school, which is of paramount importance for educators who seek to develop new schools.

**Limitations**

The MGLC remains in its infancy as a new school. The staff has undergone a significant amount of turnover within the first two years of existence, and the school was created with a limited amount of funding and resources with which to accomplish an extensive number of goals. Further, over the last two years, the school population has varied greatly due to the transient nature of the students attending the school. Thus, though some of the students have attended the school since its inception, the vast majority of students enrolled at the school as the 2011-2012 school year ends, and as the 2012-2013 school year begins, may vary significantly.

**Delimitations**

Given the dual credential qualifications of the certificated educational staff of MGLC, it could be that the exceptional skills of the staff may not be able to be generalized to other public school settings. They are an exceptional group of individuals who by their desire to teach at the school may be more inclined to be supportive of at-risk students in general. Thus, it might be difficult to generalize the results obtained from this group of exceptional educators to a general public school setting that does not have similar credential expectations of the staff. Further, many of the students attending MGLC were potentially saved from expulsion from the District due to their parents choosing to have them attend this public school of choice. Thus, generalizing the results obtained from this phenomenological study may be difficult.
**Summary**

Vast quantities of resources are directed to public education in California and across the nation. Public schools face a seemingly insurmountable challenge of providing a unique and specific educational opportunity to all attendees, while at the same time assuring the rights to a free and public education for all students. A number of educational reforms have been considered and are implemented routinely across the United States. This study focuses on the MGLC, a public school of choice, which is focusing on supporting students’ resiliency development, responsibility development, and each student’s ability to build positive relationships with each other, while at the same time setting high academic expectations for their students. This researcher sought to describe the perceptions of the professional education staff with regard to the strategies they have implemented, their belief of the effectiveness they have had as a group, and to describe any challenges they have experienced. Through the use of a phenomenological approach, this researcher sought to describe potential themes that may be present in the obtained data and to develop a description of a shared experience that can be communicated with other educators about what it is like to teach at MGLC. By seeking to understand the perspectives of the professional education staff of MGLC, this researcher will be better placed in a position to describe the collective experiences of the staff, describe the effectiveness of the implemented experiences, and to inform the staff regarding future strategies to implement to further student success.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

Introduction of Problem

The state of California is facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge with regard to students leaving and dropping out of public schools (O’Connell, 2009; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009), as are other states across the United States. The multitude of students dropping out of schools are leaving the public education systems with limited academic skills and decreased opportunities for finding successful employment upon their departure. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) reported, “High school dropouts are an economic drag on states. Dropouts are less likely than others to be employed, more likely to receive public assistance, and much more likely to be incarcerated” (p. 6). Thus, for every student who makes a choice to drop out of the public education system, the potential for negative actions that could occur in our communities is further increased.

The dilemma presents a significant challenge for all educators to structure schools that will first advance a student’s personal resilience, responsibility, and ability to develop relationships, which will change the status quo with regard to the dropout rate. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) reported that in an attempt to stem the tide of students dropping out of school, researchers have begun to seek clarification of the issues behind the reasons for students leaving school. Further, educators have attempted to institute reforms, interventions, and initiatives focused on providing public schools with the supports students need. In addition, researchers have begun to investigate the utility of specific strategies that may be needed to dramatically change the course of our current system.
Given the prevailing negative success trajectory that has befallen many of our students within public schools, a serious question arises to be answered: What will it take to improve educational opportunities for our at-risk students with regard to keeping them in school? Specifically, this study sought to qualitatively analyze the perceptions held by school staff regarding their strategies and effectiveness of those strategies on at-risk students in a school designed to foster personal resiliency, develop personal responsibility, and support positive relationship-building practices. The three components identified: resiliency, responsibility, and relationship building, are seen as paramount foundational concepts needed to support student success within the public school system and sustain student enrollment in school.

Specific reforms to the comprehensive educational system are called for to combat the expected continuation of negative academic results that could adversely impact our society at the local, state, and national levels, due to the continuing escalation of the dropout rate. If changes are not made to provide new opportunities for students at all levels of education, this problem will not diminish on its own. Changes to schools, curriculum delivery, and interactions with students, all aiming to improve the sustainability of students within the system, are needed in all public schools.

This research studied the collective perspectives of the educators at MGLC and reports on the impact those educators are having on fostering resiliency, developing personal responsibility, and building relationships for students at risk. By purposeful action, through well-conceived ideas, by conscious implementation of interventions and strategies, MGLC is seeking to change the anticipated negative success trajectory for at-risk students. The latent potential to be resilient is being ignited, the skills of
responsibility are being instructed, and the goals of developing relationships are being targeted by the staff within the MGLC. This study measured the perspectives held by the staff and identified the staff's perceptions of their effectiveness in creating positive changes for students who attend this school.

The Conceptual Framework

*Figure 3. Conceptual framework of the Matt Garcia Learning Center*
Literature Review

The three research streams for this dissertation project include Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development, and Relationship-building Development. These three components of student development are seen as being complimentary to one another and as paramount skill areas for students to fully benefit from educational resources being presented to them. While it is true many students may seemingly succeed within public education settings where no specific educational programs are being provided and offered targeting resiliency, responsibility, or relationship-building skills, this researcher would argue that embedded within that educational setting lay these components. Further, this researcher believes MGLC, a school designed to support at-risk students, may be able to benefit from a re-design of the current education program to better support students. By including more specific research-based strategies to support students’ resiliency development, by using a more focused approach to increase students’ personal responsibilities, and by engaging with parents in a more thoughtful manner to enhance relationship-building skills of students and their families, more opportunities for student success will arise.

The literature review includes an examination of research studies and reflects a mix of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches that serve to provide information about the three research streams. What is intriguing to this researcher is the overlap of the three streams often seen within the studies. Though a study may discuss resiliency skills, the topics of self-efficacy and developing personal strategies for success emerge. Though a study might discuss personal responsibility development, issues of family dynamics might emerge. Further, though discussing the need for educators to be aware of family
diversity, issues of supporting student development to use community resources may arise. I believe the examination of these particular streams of research have provided this author and the readers with a conceptual understanding of the importance of the selected concepts. This literature review has supported an envisioning of a number of potential recommended changes to MGLC in order to advance their overall ability to provide more opportunities for students and to be able to offer a broadening conceptual framework for schools seeking to expand opportunities for life development to all their students.

First, a review of the research on the resiliency development is discussed. Resiliency, or resilience, as a concept in educational settings has been reviewed, written about, and considered as an important concept by researchers (Bernard, 1991; Cesarone, 1999; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Meyer, Licklider, & Wiersma, 2009); however, the concept of resiliency has not been fully integrated into all public school systems as a paramount issue of importance with a direct connection to stemming the dropout rate from increasing. A review of the research on responsibility development is discussed next. Responsibility development is now embedded into curricula, programs, and targeted strategies to enhance and develop a student’s personal responsibility skills. Thirdly, a review of the research on relationship building is reviewed. Relationship-building skills are seen as an essential element in the development of successful human beings. A number of research projects have focused on the issues inherent in supporting students in developing the ability to develop positive relationships with others.

**Resiliency Defined – Historical Perspective**

Resilience/resiliency as a concept has been roundly defined and discussed in the literature by numerous researchers (Bernard, 1991, 1995; Cesarone, 1999; Gamezy &
Linquanti (1992) defined resilience as “that quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing” (p. 2). Cesarone (1999) wrote the definition of resilience as, “Resilience is the human capacity and the ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity” (p. 12). Resiliency has also been defined operationally, by Castro and Johnson (2008), as skills and abilities that promote: a) self awareness and acceptance, b) the establishment of healthy supportive relationships, c) interpersonal skills, and d) coping skills to help with the demands and pressures of daily life.

Research by Bernard (1991) identified five major categories of traits within individuals that help make them resilient and support the notion that youth with more resiliency tend to avoid risk and minimize consequences for engaging in risky behaviors: a) social competence or the exhibition of pro-social behaviors; these traits increase children’s abilities to find and keep healthy relationships, b) well-developed problem solving skills; these traits refer to the ability to recognize social influences in the environment and to make choices about those influences, c) autonomy; a strong sense of identity and self-worth are found in more resilient youth, d) religious or spiritual commitment; leads to a stable belief system, and e) sense of purpose and future. Chavkin, Fevl, and Gonzalez (2000) indicated resiliency theory proposes that the above identified factors, less the inclusion of the item referring to religious or spiritual commitment, form the common foundation in research among the more recent definitions of resiliency found in the literature.
Chavkin et al. (2000) discussed that a longitudinal study reviewed, consisting of over 700 Hawaiian residents born under adverse circumstances, found a distinguishing factor between the individuals who became more responsible adults was that as children they had a long, close, relationship with a responsible parent or other adult. Additionally, Bernard (1991) identified three key characteristics supporting productive development: caring relationships, communication of high expectations and positive beliefs, and opportunities for participation. More to the point, Werner and Smith (1992) argued that the most important of these protective factors is a caring relationship with someone, regardless of whether that person is a parent, teacher, or community member.

Chavkin et al. (2000) reported:

In sum, the literature on resiliency identifies five key protective factors of families, schools and communities: supportive relationships, particularly encouragement from school personnel and other adults; student characteristics, such as self-esteem, motivation, and accepting responsibility; family factors, such as parental support/concern and school involvement; community factors, such as community youth programs (e.g. sports, clubs, hobbies); and school factors, such as academic success and pro-social skills training. (p. 3)

More recent studies have focused on the interplay of supportive networks, instructional strategies, and purposeful communication, all designed to support the development of resiliency.
Figure 4. Graphical representation of the three research streams.

Resiliency Development

Using grounded theory to understand resiliency.

Pomrenke (2007). Pomrenke describes herself as a 15-year family mediator, assessor, and counselor. Pomrenke conducted a grounded study focused on
understanding how families and communities support children of parents in conflict, how those children perceive that conflict, and what potential barriers exist for those particular children during this difficult time. The study focused on 12 participating families and involved directed interviews with both the parents and at least one child of these families between the ages of 9 and 12. Pomrenke (2007) used a social inquiry model to examine the relationship between the child and their parents and how the child interacted with siblings, step-parents, and blended family members. Pomrenke examined the children’s reported perceptions to their own attributes and approaches to dealing with difficult family situations. The data collected were initially open-coded, then axial-coded to identify central phenomena. Pomrenke identified five central themes, which in turn supported her substantive level theory. In short, a cohesive family is better equipped to support a child in being resilient when faced with family conflict. Further, the better able a family is equipped to expand their family network, and the broader the external supports, such as school, peers, and community groups, the better they provide additional opportunities for the child to be resilient. This study provides a supportive theory for the need for external supports, schools for example, to be seen as an expansive resource for children undergoing parental crisis in order to support their resiliency development.

**Enhancing resiliency through education.**

**Castro and Johnson (2008).** Castro and Johnson used a pre-test/post-test research design to determine if students identified as “at risk” and provided direct instruction in the areas of emotional intelligence would demonstrate a significant difference in the areas of personal responsibility compared to a control group. Castro and Johnson found no significant differences between the groups of students who either were
provided a 16-week curriculum built on person-centered, social control, and resiliency theory, or were provided the standard curriculum. Providing teen leadership training to a group of 35 at-risk students was intended to bring forth a measured difference between the students’ self-assessed skills on the Personal Responsibility Map (PRM). The PRM, a 120-item questionnaire, is designed to measure goal achievement, emotional self-control, and self-management skills/effective behavior. The study focused on The Teen Leadership Program (TLP), designed by the Flippen and Associates group, to advance and improve students’ resiliency. No parametric differences were found between the study and control groups. Castro and Johnson (2008) pondered whether the students’ limited ability to self-assess accurately may have limited the reliability of the initial pre-test data, which in turn may have accounted for limited affect on the post-test data. Castro concluded that though the empirical differences were slight, it appeared that those in the study group displayed fewer office visits for behavior problems over the course of the study. It is important to recognize the limits of student self-assessment when seeking to quantifiably account for differences in data collected.

**Purposeful communication to develop resiliency skills.**

* Meyer, Licklider, and Wiersma (2009). These researchers sought to measure the qualitative responses of post-secondary students who participated in Resiliency Development Education (RDE) curriculum. The study was accomplished in a phenomenological manner and reviewed the pedagogical process of storytelling as a means to enhance the abilities of the participants to prepare themselves for the difficulties that may lie ahead. Forty-seven freshman students were taught in a leadership and learning academy. From this original number of 47, 20 students were invited to
participate in the study; with 11 responding positively by e-mail that they would participate.

Meyer et al. (2009) then held in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the 11 participants of 45 minutes in length. The data were transcribed, coded, and interpreted to identify themes within. Meyer et al. identified three primary themes, including the efficacy of learning resiliency through storytelling, the value of a learning community, and the transformative resiliency development of the students themselves. The researchers were cautious to note their own potential biases as part of the phenomenological process. The data indicated that the use of personal stories, folklore, and metaphors assisted students in “future-think” models of how to be resilient. That is, preparing to be successful in situations that would occur in the future. It is important to recognize that the idiosyncratic style of instructors who provided the curriculum, their abilities to make connections to the participants of the studies, and the personal engagement with study participants could have led to positive effects found in qualitative analysis that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The examination of the specific studies above and additional literature provide a summative analysis that programs designed to have a positive effect on a student’s capabilities to be resilient can, in fact, build capacity for individual students (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002; Pomrenke, 2007; Werner & Smith, 1992). Castro and Johnson (2008) stated that studies conducted by Nelson and Low (2003) and Wolin and Wolin (1993) purported, “resilient behaviors can be learned and then practiced until they become strengths. In other words, students who are resilient exhibit certain characteristics or qualities that enable them to overcome difficult or devastating circumstances, and
students who are not resilient can be taught skills that will enhance their resiliency” (p. 7). Meyer et al. (2009) conducted a phenomenological study of 11 students who participated in resiliency development education (RDE) as first-semester post-secondary students. Meyer et al. (2009) contended, “the protective factors found in resilient people emerge in a variety of ways. For example, those with social competence often possess the qualities that exude responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor” (p. 119). In essence, what Meyer et al. said was individuals who have experienced and developed the attributes described as being protective factors, no matter what the circumstances of adversity through which they have passed, appear to become stronger individuals, more flexible people, more proficient at solving problems, more empathetic when dealing with others, more attached in healthy relationships to others, and may be, in fact, able to separate from the dysfunction with which they had been challenged during their early developmental years. She further concluded, “Finally, those with a sense of purpose have goals, aspirations, hopefulness, perseverance, and a sense of a bright future” (p. 119).

The research also addressed the issue regarding the teaching of resiliency and the process of developing and exploring interpersonal skills within individuals. Meyer et al. (2009) wrote, “Teaching the concepts of resiliency requires a method or pedagogy that can span the affect in addition to the cognitive” (p. 119). Storytelling as an instructional practice, purposeful asset-building opportunities (direct instruction lessons focused on building the capacity to be resilient), or through helping individuals make additional supportive connections either internally or externally (Pomrenke, 2007, p. 363) are
approaches that have been attempted and studied in the literature as means to expanding
the opportunities for individuals to develop and learn resilient characteristics.

**Responsibility Development**

The concept of responsibility and the importance of developing responsibility as
an asset has been discussed by numerous pundits and authors over the years as a goal, a
personality trait, a strategy, a quality of character, and even as a curriculum standard for
both teachers and students. In this literature review, responsibility development is not
stringently defined, as the meaning of responsibility has many meanings to many people.
Developing social responsibility, personal responsibility, or, if you will, developing a
moral compass with which to self-lead may all be components of what it means to be
responsible. However defined and described, becoming a responsible person, acquiring
the thought process leading to responsible behavior, developing the personal integrity to
adhere to thought processes and follow-through behaviors that would sustain a student’s
engagement with public education is recognized as an important component of students’
sustainable advancement of academic skills. It is with this type of thinking in mind that
has led this review of literature.

**Teaching personal and social responsibility.**

*Escarti, Gutiérrez, Pascual, and Marín (2010).* Escarti et al. sought to examine
the differences between two groups of students identified as being at risk for dropping out
of high school and who participated in Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social
Responsibility (TPSR) model in physical education classes. Two intact groups of 15
students were studied. The intervention group participated in a 30-session program with
a trained physical education teacher. Both groups of students completed a self-efficacy
assessment tool designed to measure their abilities in: asking for help, completing their schoolwork, controlling their temper, and communicating with others. Both groups were measured prior to the intervention, after the intervention, and six months after the end of the intervention. Each student was interviewed to ascertain their qualitative perspectives of the program and to discuss the personal changes experienced. The qualitative analysis revealed that intervention students reported positive feelings about the program, credited the program for positive personal changes, and believed the changes they had realized were attributable to the program. The quantitative measures did not identify many significant differences. One significant finding in the ability of the students to enlist social resources had a lasting effect on the intervention group, whereas the comparison group had not changed in any significant fashion. The implications for using the TSPR in other settings to create positive student outcomes are very encouraging. Considering external programs are needed to build students’ responsibility, it would be wise to use research-based programs to effectively support students at school.

Environmental action to teach responsibility.

Schusler and Krasney (2010). These researchers worked with 33 adults from across the United States who had been selected for the study due to their previous work with engaging youths in Environmental Action (EA) and who had focused on Environmental Education (EE) as part of their formal or informal work with youths. Further, Schusler interviewed 46 youths who had been involved in nine programs focusing on conducting EA in the state of New York. This study was conducted in narrative format, primarily allowing the stories of the adults to serve as a knowledge base for the study. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, either in
person, or over the phone. The data collected was transcribed and coded. Nine primary practice themes emerged from the stories gathered by the participants. In short, the themes are: creating a safe space, providing structure, building relationships, bridging differences, setting expectations, meaningful contributions, supporting youth, connecting youth, and expanding horizons. Group interviews of the youths served to confirm that the youth’s “take-aways” from the program participation included physical growth, intellectual growth, psychological growth, and social development. The researchers concluded that practices seeking to support youth engagement in EA programs are often supportive of Positive Youth Development (PYD) on a larger basis and recommend that a broader use of such programs by more people could better provide for more PYD opportunities for a larger context of students. This thinking supports the idea of resiliency development in schools.

**Developing responsibility in an after-school program.**

*Walsh, Ozaeta, and Wright (2010).* Walsh et al. studied the transference of responsibility skills for a small group of 13 students, ranging in age of 9-11, 11 boys and two girls, who participated in the “Coaching Club” version of Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model program. The students were a singular group who had participated in 45 sessions of 45 minutes each in an extended-day program stretching out over two years. Meeting once a week, the students were guided and engaged in activities that included team sports, self-coaching, and personal responsibility. Of primary consideration was to determine if the skills being acquired in the program were being transferred to other environments, namely their school experiences. All 13 students participated in semi-structured interviews. In addition, the
two regular teachers of the students, and the extended-day program director were also interviewed.

The authors indicated they used an interpretivist/constructivist method as they examined multiple data pieces. The data obtained from interviews, observations, and document reviews illustrated the four primary pre-determined themes – respecting the rights of others, effort and teamwork, self-directed behaviors, and leadership and helping skills – were prevalent in the students’ responses. Eleven of the thirteen students reported personal perspectives supporting the idea of transference of the skills into their daily lives. Further, the adults confirmed the students collectively displayed more positive behaviors than before they participated in the program. This study offers another confirming piece of evidence that participation in programs designed to bring about positive youth development, including personal responsibility, results in the transference of performance with regard to positive behaviors to other environments.

**Relationship-building Development**

Human beings are social animals and most would generally conceptually agree that the most successful of human beings are not isolated from humanity. Healthy human beings tend to engage with their social surroundings in a positive manner, interact in the give and take we commonly recognize as being part of life, and may, in fact, be measured, fairly or unfairly, by society with regard to their ability to participate in the sustainability of relationships in their environments. This is not to say that some successful people may seek to develop to a state in which their personal need for companionship or emotional connections to other human beings is diminished to a point at which they simply may be alone and enjoy this. But for the most part, people seek out
connections to others, desire to be part of a larger organization than themselves, and realize an enhanced connectedness to the world and then are able to engage in positive human relationships with others. Engaging with families of at-risk students is seen as an essential characteristic for educators to expand the supportive network of resiliency development they seek to provide for students. Further, understanding and responding to the multi-faceted diverse families, more prevalent than ever in our society, is also recognized as an essential goal for educators in working to support and engage families. Moreover, striving to understand and connect with students on a positive personal level with true understanding supports the premise that to know students and support them, we must first listen to them.

**Engaging with families.**

*Kreider and Raghupathy (2010).* Kreider and Raghupathy examined the Family PLUS Pilot Initiative that is purported to be effectively and ineffectively implemented within the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Noted as a mixed-methods study, the researchers indicated they reviewed data from surveys that had been collected prior to their involvement. They used minimal focus groups to ascertain several limited perspectives of 15 students who participated in the clubs. The authors noted that 102 initial surveys with 78 matched follow-up surveys were reviewed. Unfortunately, the authors did not cite specific reference to any obtained metrics that would assist the reader with understanding the quantitative analysis. Additionally, although 29 surveys were identified to have been acquired from “leaders” of the clubs, with another 21 matched follow-up surveys, there was limited information providing detail on the survey
comments. The authors failed to fully discuss the potential ethical implications involved with the leaders reporting on the success of programs at their own sites.

One consideration of note included the importance of linking such programs for family engagement to school. For example, in one circumstance, a Family Plus program aligned itself with the PTA meeting at a school and they found more success in engaging other families to participate in the program, thus providing more opportunities for children of the parents to see their parents effectively engaged in school. The authors emphatically concluded that these programs are an effective way to assist parents with engaging in positive relationships. However, the data analysis within this study is lacking in providing the reader a clear understanding of their logic.

**Recognizing diversity within families.**

*Norris (2010).* Norris (2010) examined a strategy of providing pre-service teachers (undergraduate students readying to enter teacher training programs) with an opportunity to meet with a panel of diverse parents for a discussion about perspective, diversity, and awareness. The authors reported engaging in a qualitative review of data acquired through interviews of the five panel members and an analysis of 25 surveys returned by the students who attended the panel discussion. Norris identified four primary themes brought forth from the panel members’ interviews: do not make assumptions about families, offer alternative assignments to students, make an effort to involve all families, and have high expectations for all students. The analysis of the pre-service teacher surveys identified several themes including a broadening understanding of the true diversity apparent among families; the realization that to be “politically correct” may have meaning, but that to not engage with families due to preconceived notions may
be extremely limiting; and that understanding more about a student and family may be a true opportunity to assist that student in learning. Though discussed as an initial project, and not a full complete study, this qualitative analysis conducted by Norris identified some compelling issues. The need to gain perspective, understand the diverse nature of families and be supportive of students from all families is an important concept for not only pre-service teachers, but for teachers in the field seeking to support students each day.

**Listening carefully to students.**

*Lachuk and Gomez (2011).* These researchers’ study focused on the personally told life histories of three high school-aged students. The stories were documented and analyzed with intent identify specific reasons or supports that have sustained the students in continuing on with their education. This qualitative data was gathered in an attempt to detail that the slightest factors occurring in a student’s life may, in fact, lead to some of the more profound life events and or life directions. The data gleaned from the three histories identified three primary themes the authors advocated, encouraged, and cited as essential issues for middle grade teachers to focus and concentrate on as they attended to the needs of middle grade students.

The first theme that emerged was take care to not limit your understanding of what “family” may mean for a student. In one of the histories, the respondent indicated that two previous teachers were akin to family and it was these teachers who sustained her educational success. Noted as an essential ingredient when developing rapport and building relationships with students is a student’s perspective of who is in his or her family. The second theme identified was the need to recognize and encourage students to
use narrative to discuss their personal history and then seek to better understand that student based on that history. Having the opportunity to describe their stories, whether it is in writing or conversation, is thought to allow students to tap the latent resiliency that may be present and currently unrecognized. Providing an opportunity to connect with their own stories is thought to provide a foundation to rise above any difficulties they have endured.

The third primary concept was to remember to be an advocate for educational opportunities for all students. Striving to support the academic, social, and personal development of students not only provides for more opportunities for student success, but provides them with evidence that a caring adult, specifically an educator, is taking note of them and desires for them to have those opportunities. Thus, it is the act of providing support that may also provide a supportive link for the student to remain connected to school. Though not a classically designed study, the use of life histories, acquired through a qualitative process, are used to make the point that teachers must strive to connect to students, strive to get to know students, and work to support students at many levels while they are in their care and beyond. Taking interest in students and their lives is seen as a way to broaden the foundation of future success for that student on many levels and is recognized as a way to tap into the latent opportunity to be resilient.

**Summary**

To transform schools and communities into environments that foster resilience, support each child to become more responsible, and allow students to build relationships that will positively support their development is no easy task. Strengthening the protective processes in schools and communities requires fundamental changes in beliefs,
visions, rituals, and behaviors of educators and community members. The literature provided for a wealth of examples indicating that when educators and communities focus on expanding the opportunities for resiliency development for youths, seek to provide education and supportive training in responsibility development, and have people willing to make and keep positive healthy relationships with students, good things happen for educational communities. When children tend to demonstrate more resilient behaviors, they develop more resources to advance and sustain their personal responsibility, and they appear to be more fully engaged in healthy connectedness to other people.

Support to build more opportunities for young people to be part of something bigger than themselves is inherent in the literature. Support to expand opportunities for students to try on resilient characteristics, practice resilient behaviors in safe places with supportive instructors, and to receive education on the types of behaviors that will lead to more resilient behaviors are also supported in the literature. Recognizing that students from wide and various levels can benefit from receiving the support from a positive healthy adult in or out of school is supported by the literature. Further, being able to support students to be able to develop trust and develop security with other people, in essence, to know they can make mistakes, yet persevere to another day is paramount to developing healthy people. If the goal of providing supports to the collective students who enter our public school systems is not to first develop healthy people, we may in fact be missing the mark on fully seeking to move the success of public education forward.

When considering the extensive resources invested in assisting students gain academic skills in our public school settings, educators often find students more prepared for success are more able to realize that success. Thus, being able to better prepare
students for academic success by first ensuring students’ resiliency is being supported, that they are developing responsibility traits to sustain their academic success, and they are developing the ability to develop positive relationships with others, not only provides a better opportunity for each student’s growth, but provides an exponential benefit to all students to benefit from the opportunities collectively provided. For example, decreasing the frustration for one student may actually impact the delivery of instruction to an entire class, or for that matter an entire grade level, or school. As educators come to be more aware of their need to focus on supporting resiliency, responsibility development, and relationship-building development for all students, more positive return on the investment in public education will be realized.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

Addressing the specific reforms needed in today’s educational system may appear to be a staggering dilemma, yet by focusing on the particular experiences and perceptions of the professional education staff of MGLC, this researcher sought to gain an understanding of the challenges faced by educators. This research design was focused on examining the perceptions of the professional education staff of MGLC as they strove to develop and advance the resiliency levels, responsibility levels, and interpersonal relationship-building skills of at-risk students who attended MGLC. The phenomenological study was conducted to best describe the strategies used by the educators to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building. The data obtained through participant semi-structured interviews were coded, analyzed, and described to assist the current education staff, and other educators, in understanding the true essence of the experiences of the MGLC education staff. The developed description of collective experiences sought to expand the knowledge for educators developing other learning environments that also seek to provide expansive opportunities for students to advance their academic skills, increase return on investment of educational resources, increase graduation rates, stem the tide of drop-out rates, and increase access and equity to students in public education settings.

This study sought to describe the perceptions of the professional educators regarding the effectiveness of the strategies they employed with students. The staff
perceptions were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Further, this study sought to provide a foundation upon which a conceptual framework may be developed focusing on school design. Thus, a phenomenological approach was accomplished through the use of semi-structured interviews with the staff, in addition to capturing observational data and an examination of artifacts. This chapter provides detail pertaining to the site and population of the study, research design and rationale, research methods, and ethical considerations.

Site and Population

Population Description

The professional education staff currently working at the MGLC made up the population of this phenomenological study. At the time of the study, there were 13 academic instructors, one certificated counselor, and one site administrator making up the site population. All 15 professional education staff were requested to participate in the study via a semi-structured interview or in a focus group. It was anticipated that 60% of the 15 adults would participate, thus totaling the potential to nine participants. In reality, eight staff members participated in the study. The adults were asked to participate in a semi-structured individual interview.

The male to female ratio of this population measured 60% female and 40% male. The ethnicity of the instructors is representative of the general teaching population of the District. Each of the professional education staff was personally invited to participate in a semi-structured interview and was presented with an individual consent form (see Appendix A), which detailed the confidential parameters of the obtained information. Further, each of the participants were advised that their participation was completely
voluntary and would in no manner result in any effects on their employment status with the District.

**Site Description**

Matt Garcia Learning Center School (MGLC) is located in Fairfield, California. The doors of this public school of choice were opened October 18, 2010 to 84 students. At the time of the study, MGLC served students in grades 2-12. The conceptual design for MGLC was conceived in July 2010, and over the ensuing three months, the selected site administrator, teachers, and classified personnel were recruited and hired. The school opened with eight instructors and a principal following a modernization of the previously closed site that had been an elementary school. The professional education staff totaled 15 individuals, 13 academic instructors, one certificated counselor, and one principal. The academic instructors each held a valid multiple subject teaching credentials or a single subject teaching credential. Each academic instructor was expected to hold a second credential in special education, a bilingual-cross culturally proficient credential, or be enrolled in a program designed to assist them in acquiring these credentials. The school counselor held a pupil personnel services credential, and the site principal held an administrative services clear credential.

MGLC had a number of community supports in place in addition to the standard support staff most public schools employed. A full-time counselor, two full-time instructional assistants, a campus monitor, custodian, secretary, and part-time attendance clerk provided the base support for the students at the school. In addition to these supports, several community agency groups including Matt Garcia Dream Team, Place To Be, 2Be Successful Youth, Police Athletic Leagues, and Parent Resource Center
occupied offices at the school site. Additional community groups were brought onto the campus in an effort to provide supports for the students of the school and their parents.

**Site Access**

As the Director of Human Resources for the school district, I engaged in conversations with the Superintendent of the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District regarding being able to conduct this action research study on the MGLC campus. The Superintendent was a driving force behind the inception of the idea for the MGLC and was extremely supportive of the need to gather evidence regarding the perceptions of the professional education staff, as well as how and if the school is accomplishing the goals it was designed to fulfill. I engaged in conversations with the principal regarding the design of the education curriculum and many of the procedures in place at the school site. The MGLC principal was fully committed to providing as much support as requested to support the completion of this study and provided a letter of approval for this phenomenological study to be accomplished at the site (see Appendix B). Both the district superintendent and site principal indicated sincere interest in the outcomes of this study.

One issue to be considered is that, as a “backyard researcher,” completing research in my personal work environment, caution must be taken on my behalf to allow the qualitative data to speak for themselves and to strive to avoid any political pressure to guide the study to any conclusions not based on the data obtained in the collective semi-structured interviews or focus groups. Given the phenomenological process, I was cautious to remain aware that though there is a strong commitment and desire for the school to do well by many of the stakeholders, I could not let this influence the process,
procedures, data collection, findings, and or interpretation of the results of the action research process. In fact, I sought to suspend my personal bias to the extent possible during the study. Further, there are practical implications to consider when completing this research at this site given my role within the District. I ensured that my role as the Director of Human Resources was not utilized in any fashion that would unduly influence the process and/or results of the study.

**Research Design and Rationale**

This study used several approaches and methods to obtain data to examine the primary questions of the study. The MGLC staff was initially requested to complete a consent form describing the general premise of the study and detailing the confidentiality provided during and after the study (see Appendix A). Creswell (2007) reported that Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology approach is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on providing a descriptive analysis of the experiences of the participants. The semi-structured interviews focused on gaining their descriptions of the educators’ practice in using strategies designed to assist students in becoming resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship-building skills. As part of the semi-structured interview process, each site educator was asked to provide examples of situations in which students’ resiliency, responsibility development, and opportunities to build relationships were enhanced by school personnel. The obtained data were digitally recorded for future coding analysis. Though designed to last no longer than 30 minutes, four of the semi-structured interviews surpassed this time frame (see Chapter 4). The primary focus of the researcher during the interviews was to listen to the participants, guide the conversations through open-ended
questions, and ask probing questions when needed to expand upon the data being provided. Two education staff members preferred to participate in a multi-participant interview.

The underlying premise of this study was that the professional education staff experienced the MGLC from their unique perspectives; yet, they collectively experienced the development of the school as a group, educating students, and building this school community together. Thus, they have participated in the phenomenon that is “educating students at MGLC.” Creswell (2007) discussed that a phenomenological study reports on the meaning of lived experiences of individuals to describe a phenomenon. Seeking to understand each of the individual perspectives in order to build a descriptive understanding of the collective experiences is seen as a powerful process with which to understand this particular phenomenon.

The data obtained from the staff through semi-structured interviews were transcribed for coding analysis. The researcher then coded the data to identify significant statements, sentences, or quotes providing an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Next, the researcher identified themes present from the collective data analysis based on the responses. The data were further categorized into groups to aid in building a vivid review of the MGLC through both a textual and structural description. This bracketing of the data lead to better understanding of the critical themes arising from the data. Finally, the researcher developed a composite description of the essential, invariant structure and provided the readers with a collective understanding of all the participants’ experiences.
Matt Garcia Learning Center is in the formative stages of development. The second year of implementation is coming to an end, and the school is continuing transformative changes to the foundational structure that is the bedrock of the school. Further, the school is being closely monitored to determine if the current foundational structure should be considered organic and still growing and to determine if the school is sustainable as a 2-12-grade school. As the school continues into its third year of existence, potential changes to both the location, structure, and curriculum are being considered by the Superintendent’s Cabinet. The experiences of the professional education staff of the school were not documented through any other type of specific assessment tool or research study. It is thought that by capturing the individual and collective perspectives of the professional education staff through a phenomenological research design, their shared experiences could better be understood and shared with stakeholders and other educators who, in the end, may decide the fate of the school. This research will be able to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon that is “educating students at MGLC.”

The culminating results will provide a baseline of data that could lead to potential needed changes to the school. Based on the qualitative data obtained, analyzed, and provided in descriptive form, the superintendent’s cabinet will have more data on which to base their decisions, rather than simply using subjective viewpoints to make decisions. The unique perspectives of the staff were gathered, synthesized, and collectively examined to better understand the past two years and to provide guidance in future decisions about the school. By capturing a glimpse of the school’s developmental experiences during the first two years, a better understanding of potential future changes
is also anticipated. Understanding the perceptions held by the education staff, documenting the experiences that have been lived, and offering time for the staff to reflect on the potential aspirations they hold for the school are recognized as potential positive outcomes of this study.

**Research Methods**

**Introduction – List of Methods Used**

The following is a listing of the specific methods used to collect data in this specific study: Observations, Semi-structured Interview (see Appendix C), and Review of Artifacts (see Appendix D). For this particular study, the phenomenological process was selected as the primary research method. Creswell (2007) indicated that phenomenological research seeks to describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences. Further, phenomenological research seeks to describe what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. With regard to this particular study, this researcher has the opportunity to be involved in the initial development of the conceptual idea of MGLC and participated in the selection of several of the staff members of the site itself. Thus, though there is a personal investment in the school that cannot be wholly removed from the consciousness of the researcher, the researcher sought to set aside personal judgment, bias, and prejudices regarding held perceptions and beliefs about the school. Moustakas (1994) described this procedure as “epoche,” that is, setting aside personal experiences to see fresh perspectives as they have been lived and reported by the participants. The researcher believes having an opportunity to meet with, discuss perceptions, and question the professional education staff through semi-structured interviews and focus groups to ascertain their perspectives
and input will provide a rich and deep data source. The desire to understand what has truly transpired at MGLC over the previous two years in order to develop a clear perspective on the lived experiences of the staff is seen as an important step to understanding the phenomenon of educating at the MGLC. Further, as the third year of implementation fast approaches, the data gathered are useful in understanding the depth of commitment perceived by the staff. Attempting to see what the collective experiences have brought to the education of students is viewed as paramount for further assessing the benefits of the MGLC to the students of the Fairfield-Suisun community.

**Stages of Data Collection**

At the inception of this study, observational data collection was initiated with specific intent on capturing the tenor of the staff as individuals and as a collective group. The study was initiated during September of the 2012-2013 school year. Eight staff participants were asked to sign consent sheets and to self-report general professional information, to include total years of educational experience, teaching credentials held, time spent at MGLC, specialized training completed, and degrees held. This data assisted in further describing the professional educational staff as a population.

The semi-structured interview consisted of several open-ended questions and is included in this proposal as Appendix C. The interview protocol was developed to allow each participant to become comfortable with the interview process, to limit potential stress, and to provide an avenue for the participant to share experiences regarding their personal perceptions and their perceptions regarding student success and challenges. General observational data were recorded by the lead researcher in a field book during the delivery of the survey for later review and assistance with coding.
The face-to-face interactive interviews occurred during the fall semester of the 2012-2013 school year. The educational staff interviews were conducted to allow the educators to describe the strategies they used to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building. Further, the semi-structured interview sought to obtain the perceptions the staff members held regarding the effectiveness of these approaches. A final component of the interviews was to ascertain the lessons learned about these approaches and to allow the participants to postulate as to how those lessons might inform future strategies to assist students in the future at MGLC.

A review and analysis of artifacts was accomplished as well to provide contextual understanding in the vivid description created by the researcher.

Table 1

*Proposed Timeline for Data Analysis and Reporting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of research proposal</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral committee review and revisions</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal defense hearing and approval</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Certification-Drexel University</td>
<td>June 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect study participation agreements</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclude semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete transcriptions of data</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin horizontal analysis</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify themes</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft findings</td>
<td>November 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report results</td>
<td>December 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document revisions</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission and defense of dissertation</td>
<td>February 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Description of Each Method Used

The data obtained in observation form were captured by the primary researcher in memo and summative fashion. Following each opportunity for engagement with the participants as individuals, in visits to the site, during interview opportunities, or during focus group meetings, the researcher descriptively annotated personal observations of the events in a field book. The observational data collected for these occurrences included names of the professional staff, descriptors based on the characteristics of behavior displayed by the participants, the tenor of the event, and the context of the event. This observational data was used in developing the descriptive analysis of the phenomenon considered educating students at MGLC.

The design of the semi-structured interview was developed by the researcher. The semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded to review at a later date for coding purposes. They were open-ended in nature and designed to provide an opportunity for the selected participants to describe the strategies they used to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building. Further, the semi-structured interview sought to obtain the perceptions that the staff held regarding the effectiveness of these approaches. A final component of the interviews was to ascertain the lessons learned about these approaches and to allow the participants to postulate as to how those lessons might inform future strategies to assist students in the future at MGLC.

Ethical Considerations

This action research study was focused on acquiring some personally reported information of the professional education staff with regard to their years of experience.
and acquired credentials and education. Further, the research sought to assess the educational staff’s collective perceptions of the strategies they had implemented to teach resilience to students, support personal responsibility development, and support student engagement in positive interpersonal relationships. The data were obtained through self-reporting procedures and interviews with the staff. Personal connections and interactions were proposed and intended between the researcher and the participants at several intervals in this design model. Thus, it became apparent that given the design model of this study, the need to engage in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) “Exempt” process was essential prior to initiating the study, and especially prior to collecting any data from the participants. The IRB process is designed to review the potential risk to study participants and to ensure that ethical procedures and practices will be considered and used throughout the study. By examining the purpose of the study, the background of the study, the participants of the study, the research design and methodology of the study, and the proposed intervention, the IRB considered the potential risks, benefits, privacy protections suggested and carefully determined if the study was worthy of approval and execution.

As previously explained, the participants of this action research study included the professional education staff at MGLC. All the professional education staff were over the age of 18 and provided consent for their personal participation. Each participant was asked to provide personal written assent to participate in the study. The consent forms also provided positive confirmation of their consent to be recorded through digital media during semi-structured interviews. The participants were assured their confidentiality as individuals would not be divulged. Full disclosure of the premise, intent, and expected
parameters for participation in the study was provided to the participants. Since the study occurred in a public high school setting, the participants, all of whom were employed by the school district, received assurance that they did not have to assent to the study simply because they were employees of the district. The freedom to participate or to not participate was made clear to the participants to ensure no one felt pressured to agree to participate or continue involvement in the study and to ensure they had provided informed consent to all of the proposed activities with a full understanding of what those activities included.

Care was taken to fully advise all participants with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy. As a phenomenological study seeking to understand the collective lived experiences of the group of educators, it was important for the participants to be assured that their personal data, or even their personal experiences, were not the essential focus of the study. The participants were advised that the data collected were to be analyzed as a way to describe the group of professional educators as a unit that has lived the phenomenon together as an educational community providing education to students at MGLC. It was explained to each participant that the group perceptions of the broader educational community was the focus of the study and the design was created to understand the overall comprehensive experiences of that group. The educational staff participants were advised that none of the personally identifiable collected data would be shared with other district administration or the public in any identifiable manner. Given that some sensitive data may have been divulged in the semi-structured interviews, or through other forms of collected data, it was important the participants understood that though personal statements may be included in the written
description of the phenomenon to describe a specific circumstance or situation, individuals who provided the data would not be identified as real individuals in the data analysis or in the report of findings section of the research. It was believed that if the participants were fully advised the data would not be personally identifiable, the validity of the results obtained would be a more accurate representation of the true experiences of the participants.

This researcher considered that some of the professional educational staff may have been preoccupied with the potential of being laid off as instructors in the District, which could have clouded their reasons for participating in the study. As a researcher, an educator, and as the Director of Human Resources for the District, I focused on understanding this reality and in comprehending that the need for full disclosure of the study intent was paramount to participation of those involved. Hence, I clearly ensured that all the participants understood they could make the choice to participate or not with no repercussions to their standing at the school and with regard to their continuation at the school and working in the district. I focused on providing as much information as possible to them to allay any concerns or fears they might have had with participating.

Site access was formally obtained by seeking the active consent and written permission of the site principal. This provided the researcher with an opportunity to delineate the parameters of the study with the site administration. This was seen as an important and integral step in providing clarity to the site principal and the staff of the site regarding the limits of access to the data should they request them. There might have been a presumption that since the study was occurring at their site, they would have access to the obtained data; however, given the need to ensure the privacy rights of the
participants, the data collected was strictly limited. Similarly, access to data collected from the educational staff was not made available to the site principal and remained closely guarded and used for study purposes only. Given the need for confidentiality and protection of privacy rights, this researcher clearly communicated the intention of the researcher prior to the inception of the study, and again, prior to each semi-structured interview with the site principal and the staff members. Taking time to clarify these limits was seen as a way to minimize any potential breach of ethics with regard to sharing study data with anyone.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

This chapter begins by providing the reader with a review of the purpose of this phenomenological study, restating the research questions, and reiterating the design methods for the study. These are followed by a brief description of the participants and information regarding their educational work history in general, as well as that at Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC). The findings and results of the semi-structured interviews are provided via a thick, rich, description of the shared experiences of the professional educational staff of MGLC. Transcript excerpts, observation notes, and artifact review data are woven together to present this description of perception, protocols, and educational practice of the subjects. Participants’ true identities are held in confidence per study parameters. The results are presented followed by the over-arching emergent themes identified in the data along with the researcher’s interpretations and analysis of the obtained results. The chapter summary concludes with a review of the results, significant points presented in the chapter, and discussion of the patterns and trends.

Purpose Statement

By purposeful design, the MGLC seeks to incorporate the best in instructional strategies and focuses on implementing strategies to assist students with building relationships with other students as a necessary and important component to sustain students’ attendance within the public school system. This phenomenological study sought to describe MGLC professional educators’ perceptions of their efforts and
strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships. The study sought to utilize the obtained data to understand these perceptions and inform the school of thoughtful changes to expand educational opportunities for students in the District. Further, the data may be used to broaden the full understanding of the dynamics occurring at MGLC.

**Research Questions**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. How do the professional educators of MGLC describe strategies they use to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building?

2. What perceptions do the professional educators of MGLC have of the effectiveness of these approaches?

3. How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the lessons learned about these approaches, and how might those lessons inform future strategies to assist students at MGLC?

**Sampling and Focus of Interview Questions**

Specifically, within the interview protocol, several questions were asked of each participant that targeted their personal descriptions, perceptions, and collective understanding of the school. The intent of the questions was to elicit responses in a comfortable atmosphere, where the participants were free to explore their personal
reflections and expand on those reflections during their time with the researcher.

Questions focusing on issues of resiliency included:

Question 4: Please describe some of the strategies used by the MGLC professional education staff to teach students to become resilient.

Question 7.a: Please share with me your perceptions of how effective the above mentioned strategies have been to support the development of students’ resilience.

Questions focusing on issues of responsibility included:

Question 5: Please describe some of the strategies that are used by the MGLC professional education staff to build personal responsibility for students.

Question 7.b: Please share with me your perceptions of how effective the above mentioned strategies have been to support the development of students’ responsibility.

Questions focusing on issues of positive interpersonal relationship building included:

Question 6: Please share with me some of the strategies that are used by the MGLC professional education staff to engage in positive interpersonal relationship building?

Question 7.c: Please share with me your perceptions of how effective the above mentioned strategies have been to support the development of students’ relationship building.

The participants were not held accountable for responding to the questions solely in a sequential manner, and several of the participants returned to previously addressed questions when responding to questions asked later in the interview process. The data were reviewed in a holistic fashion, was coded for responses per the described research
methods, and was utilized to enlighten the reader as to the collective representation of the experiences of the MGLC participants.

**Design**

This single-site phenomenological study used qualitative methods to identify the perceptions of the professional education staff at MGLC regarding their collective experience in providing instruction to students at MGLC. Fifteen participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews through personal invitation. Eight participants consented to and participated in the study. Each of the participants met with this researcher in face-to-face, one-on-one, or group interviews. As discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the professional education staff consisted of 15 credentialed individuals employed at MGLC at the end of the 2012-2013 school year. Eight participants agreed to the semi-structured interview. All the participants were provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity regarding their participation and specific responses. Further, the participants were informed that their responses would have no bearing on their status within the District as employees. The interviews varied from 20 minutes in length to several lasting over an hour.

**Data Collection**

Each interview was conducted in the researcher’s office within the Central Offices of the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District. All interviews were recorded with several digital recording devices and were transcribed for coding purposes. The researcher maintained observational data notes during each interview. The same parameters were utilized for all the interviews; however, during some interviews, the researcher asked several additional open-ended questions not included on the standard
protocol sheet when clarification of a response or more information was required. The length of each interview varied and is noted in the participant information chart. None of the participants received numeration for their participation in the study. Field notes were also collected during visits to the school site.

**Participant Data**

Table 2

*Summary of Participant Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Professional Experience</th>
<th>Years of Service at MGLC</th>
<th>Time span at MCLC</th>
<th>Interview Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
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<td>October 2010-November 2012</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
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<td>1:04:26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
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<td>59:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
<td>October 2010-Present</td>
<td>59:51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>August 2011-Present</td>
<td>26:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>August 2011-Present</td>
<td>18:49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of the interviews, four of the eight participants had served at MGLC since its inception, 2.3 years; one of the participants had one year of experience at the
school and left for another school; another left the school at the end of her second year of
the program; and two others joined the school at the start of the second year and
continued to work at the school in its third year of implementation. In sum, five of the
eight participants were continuing to provide services to students at MGLC during the
interview process.

Findings

The findings presented in this chapter represent the culmination of this study,
which was conducted using a phenomenological approach to field research and data
analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Six major themes emerged from the data set, consisting of
transcripts from semi-structured interviews with professional educators at Matt Garcia
Learning Center, observational field notes, and artifact reviews. The six emerging
findings of this study are: a) Passionate Belief in the Power of People, b) Making
Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference, c) A
High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders, d) Communication is an
Essential Element, e) Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone, and f) It’s a
Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes. Each emerging theme
contains sub-findings, detailed in Figure 5 and is described in full detail throughout this
chapter.
Major Themes and Sub-findings

Passionate Belief in the Power of People

- Making connections in a personal manner through conversation, interaction, and activities with students is paramount to initiating success for at-risk students.
- Demonstrating care, compassion, and kindness, while at the same time depersonalizing students’ negative behaviors will better ready students in their efforts of facing adversity.
- Striving to create relationships with students’ families, no matter what that family structure may appear to be, provides for a broader network of supports for each student.
- Supporting the development of student teamwork, broadening students’ awareness of perspectives of school/family networks, and fostering an organic process for school culture to development provides for more opportunities for students to grow as people first.

Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference

- There exist challenges to enlist, develop and hold onto a committed, consistent education staff, which are collectively supportive of all students.
- Initiating and maintaining committed motivation from both students and their parents has been extremely difficult.
- The staff had limited opportunities for collective professional meaningful staff development that allowed them the collaborative process needed to move forward as a school, especially in the first two formative years.

A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders

- Communicating with and providing feedback to students is an essential component to connecting with and reaching students to broaden their self-awareness and perspective.

Communication is an Essential Element

- Providing students with consistent protocols to follow during their tenure at the school and logical consequences for their actions supports them in developing personal responsibility.
- Offering clear information, providing flexible choices within the set protocols, differentiation and adaptation to day-to-day fluctuations in students’ needs provides for more opportunities to increase success for students.

Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone

- Continue to focus on new and evolving strategies that will continue to build collaborative processes.
- Success is a relative term, and each success should be recognized and celebrated.

Figure 5. Findings and sub-findings of the study.
Passionate Belief in the Power of People

In response to questions focused on closely held beliefs of the professional education staff, there was an overwhelming response from the participants that emerged, indicating each of them held a strong passionate belief in the power of people to positively influence other peoples’ behavior, specifically students. Through multiple responses to questions, the participants continually reflected with great conscientiousness that what they were doing within their professional day, and with each student, was purposeful, empowering, almost sacred work. The passion in their voices was clearly heard. The care shown when responding to questions and the meanings behind their words indicated that as individuals, and as a group, there was a collective awareness that what they were trying to accomplish was more than just teaching, more than just working with children, more than just a job.

Respondents indicated it was about believing that they, as a professional education staff, could truly and positively impact the lives of students in need and propel students to place themselves in a better position to meet with success. The results present the case that to make a positive impact on students’ lives, it is imperative educators believe they can have an impact on students’ resiliency development, responsibility development, and ability to develop positive relationships with other human beings. Moreover, the findings reflect that numerous examples of purposeful intentional actions by the staff demonstrate they actively walked their talk. Several participants shared personal stories regarding how their initial connection with MGLC began.

I had known Matt Garcia with his affiliation with our school district. He was very involved and very into mentoring our students and [I] met the family. And after he passed and this opportunity arose, it just seemed like a natural progression to
open the school using him as a symbol of what our hope for outcome is. That is, students who are maybe at risk and have some issues, but through leadership and support were able to find mentors and rigorous education and turn things around and become contributing members of society. (P2)

I originally grew up here in Fairfield and went through all the schools in Fairfield here. And so, when I was looking at positions in Fairfield, I saw that the one for Matt Garcia opened up, and there was more of a sign to come back and teach here because he was a dear friend of mine in school, we both graduated together, we were in leadership together; he was involved in school spirit stuff and I was involved too. So, we always saw one another. And so, I felt that that was my calling then. (P3)

Participants were prompted by the following question as part of the semi-structured interview: Question #9: “People often talk about helping students build resiliency, develop responsibility, and build relationships as needed skills to succeed in school. How do you feel about this statement?” The question itself was designed to engage the participants in self-reflection, allow them to think about their beliefs, and allow them to free think their responses. Given the significance of the beliefs found in their responses, the essence of each participant’s answer is provided as a data set upon which interpretation is provided.

Participant #1 indicated he believed the teachers who were most successful at MGLC were those teachers who understood the importance of making connections with students, those who took the time to really try to understand the issues with which the students were individually dealing and carrying daily, and that made it a priority to work to build relationships with students first, rather than to simply seek to have students complete work.

I think it’s essential, and I would think that probably the biggest one there is relationship. If a teacher and a student have a relationship in the classroom, you’re able to access the other two [Resiliency and Responsibility development]. If you have a relationship with the student, the students feels a responsibility to
Several participants perceived that the primary function of the school should be to engage and support students in transformation, not only as students, but as people. This belief in the importance of their actions shone through in their responses.

I would definitely agree with that. I feel very good when you said that statement. I want to make sure I understood it because I feel like I agree with that statement because that’s exactly what I think about why Matt Garcia Learning Center was created for that exact reason. I think that people recognized here, these kids are being, they’re in the middle. They’re like they’re smart, but don’t have those resources, they’re not-why aren’t they as resilient as they could be? Let’s give them those tools. Let’s not just, you know, expel them. This is ridiculous. Let’s do something for them that they can maybe-and I think that yeah, it just ties into our philosophy. I think that, that, you know, helping them to be resilient for all of the reasons that we have stated already. (P6)

Participant #8 supported this feeling and reported that to her it was about changing a student’s life course, not just about completing homework or doing well in a particular academic skill. Her response is representative of a number of participant responses that were reflective of this similar perception.

I think that’s absolutely true. And I think it not only helps them to be successful in school, they can learn it in school so that they’re successful in life. I think school has a responsibility to teach those things to kids as part of the academic curriculum because it’s a great place to practice those skills. I mean you cannot have, use those skills, you need to have those skills when you leave school. (P8)

Several participants expressed the idea that the important work being done on behalf of students is personally connected work and meaningful in many ways beyond you to be successful. If you can develop a student to internalize that responsibility, you’re going to make them be resilient to anything else that’s going on around them. And, so, in order to do that, you have to make sure you develop the relationships with the students. You have to make sure that the student internalizes the responsibility they have at school. It’s their job to be there. It’s their job to be successful. I can facilitate anything you want me to facilitate. But if you’re not going to take ownership of that, they you’re never going to develop any resiliency that allows you to be successful academically or in the work world. I guess I would focus on that. (P1)
teaching academics. They reported that much of the intent of the work is focused on preparing students for future obstacles in school, in the workplace, or in life in general, which goes beyond normal school priorities of teaching academics. There is a shared belief that the power in the blossoming relationships is a real, palpable feeling, supported by many of the participants’ responses. These responses provide more evidence that the staff believes people making connections with people, whether the people involved are certificated, classified, or support personnel, cannot and should not be underappreciated or taken for granted.

Well, I think they do, and I think as adults, we all have to model that every single day. It’s one of the ongoing discussions we have with the classified and certificated staff. And the one thing I really try to support all of them whether its parents, students, staff is that it’s okay to have a misstep, or a bad day or a bad decision. It’s what we do after that. It’s, do you obsess with that and let it, you know, overrule and override everything, or do you regroup, look inside and go: “You know what? What’s another way I could look at this and move forward?” It’s helping staff and students and parents not get stuck—not get stuck. It’s not the end of the world, it’s another opportunity. (P2)

Participant #3 focused on the idea that the skills being supported are not just school-based, but personal skills that will help the children be successful in other environments.

I think it’s a strong skill that they have to have because they’re always going to have to come across obstacles. And they also need to know how to build positive relationships with adults. I always tell them that sometimes the problems you have, you might not be able to solve on your own, but if there are people that see that you’re doing what you should be doing, they’ll help you. (P3)

Though passionate about their belief that they can, and are, making a difference, the reality of each student’s situation is not lost upon the staff. As a professional group of educators, their responses indicated they understood that given the academic difficulties many of their students have had, it simply may not be logistically practical for each of
their students to be able to graduate and head to college. However, understanding this reality does not diminish the importance of their belief to support the transformative possibilities for students in their actions. Several participants stated it this way:

I agree with that. I think my goal is, obviously not all of our kids are going to college. But if they can gain enough skills in high school to be successful, to get a job somewhere in the community, if it’s picking up trash, if it’s working at McDonald’s, if it’s a manager at Macy’s, as long as they can get enough skills to be successful and happy in life, then I think we’ve done our job…We’re just getting these kids out to be successful, to be happy, and to raise their children the right way, instead of getting trapped in that cycle that so many of them would normally get caught in of I never graduated high school. (P4)

Additionally, Participant #5 stated,

I would agree. I think they need to be able to—you know, last year, I used to tell my students or we would talk about things, and their big thing is fairness. It has to be fair…And so, they are growing up with this idea that everybody wins. And you have to have that—you know, the resilience to be able to say, “I didn’t make it. I may not be as good in math as this person, but that doesn’t make me less of a student. Or, I’m still as good of a student.” (P5)

Participant #7’s response indicated concurrence with the previous participant’s response.

In order to be successful in school you have to be able to get along, not only with your peer, but teachers, adults around you. And in the-and so prepare our students for the workforce, for their lives beyond school. This will potentially be one of the most important skills that they will need to have. So you definitely need to teach them how to be resilient, how to be able to supersede situations that may get in their way and just keep moving on. Not to allow issues or things that may come up to devastate you’re their lives. (P7)

At the crux of many of the participants’ responses was an overriding theme that the work being accomplished is meaningful, beneficial to students, and comes about through purposeful, thoughtful, actionable behaviors leading to changes to their students’ negative success trajectories. Meaning, that by holding onto a passionate belief, what is being done is essential work and students’ lives are being changed.
Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference

Study participants extensively responded in a manner supporting the importance of focusing on and making connections with students and the need to then build and leverage those budding relationships to further the academic, social, and emotional growth of students and their families. Participants provided a number of examples on which, as individuals and as a collective staff, they have focused this issue. The following sub-findings emerged within the data: a) Making connections in a personal manner through conversation, interaction, and activities with students is paramount to initiating success for at-risk students; b) Demonstrating care, compassion, and kindness, while at the same time depersonalizing students’ negative behaviors will better ready students in their efforts at facing adversity; c) Striving to create relationships with students’ families, no matter what that family structure may appear to be, provides for a broader network of supports for each student; d) Supporting the development of student teamwork, broadening students’ awareness of perspectives of school/family networks, and fostering an organic process for school culture to development provides for more opportunities for students to grow as people first.

Making connections in a personal manner through conversation, interaction, and activities with students is paramount to initiating success for at-risk students. When responding to the interview questions pertaining to assisting students with building interpersonal relationship-building skills, it became significantly apparent that each of the responding participants believed making personal connections with students was of primary importance for finding any success with students at MGLC. Participant #1
provided a clear persuasive response regarding this shared perspective when describing personal perceptions of his account of some teachers’ successes.

They were able to have a relationship with the students. They were able to get the students to trust them, to know that they, the teacher wanted to be there. The teacher wanted to work with the population of students, we had and understood that those students have difficulties, but that was why we were there. They also, I think, had a rigor in their classrooms that made it feel like a real school to the kids. They were able to challenge them academically, to share with the students that they understood they might have problems, but also let the students know that that’s what we were there for. We were able to help them. We were there to get them ready to go back to a different school, to go back to their home school and our job was to try to find a way to prepare them for that. And if they were willing to work, if they wanted to go back to their home school that they will to meet the expectations and also the partnership between those students and those teacher that they were able to work on together. (P1)

Moreover, when discussing the importance of building, maintaining, and sustaining relationships with students, Participant #1 elaborated:

I guess some of the biggest lessons had to do with relationships like I was talking. I mean a good teacher can have a relationship with any kind of student. A teacher who is willing to put in the work, a teacher who’s willing to give some of their personal time to understand the students and know where the students are coming from, and a teacher who is willing to not necessarily look at the student and say, “What are you doing? You’re doing something wrong.” and you’re able to look at the student and ask, “Why are you doing it?” and want to understand more why than what the student is doing will be successful no matter what. (P1)

Specifically, Participant #1 described some particular activities indicating a commitment to building relationships that went far beyond the standard teacher-student relationship:

I was willing to take the kids on and do extracurricular activities with them. I had a group of twelve students that I took to science camp for a week in Santa Cruz in my second year. My first year, I had a group of students who had the opportunity to earn tickets to the basketball game. We went to a Warrior’s game. I had a group of students that were able to earn a reward to go to a River Cat’s baseball game up in Sacramento. We had afterschool activities. We got involved with those schools if they progressed and if they were achieving what they were supposed to be achieving at Matt Garcia. There were rewards. There are benefits of producing in the classroom on the formative assessments, based on the benchmarks…So the idea of having them try in order for them to be successful
and finding something to motivate them allowed you to develop a relationship with them that was beyond just teacher-student relationship. It was more of a mentor-mentee relationship that I was there every day and told them, “I’m not here just to teach you. I’m here to teach you how to be successful in other situations besides my class.” (P1)

A number of additional specific examples provided insight into some of the other ways used to connect with students.

I knew that there are teachers who were giving up their lunch hour and go play basketball with the kids. There were teachers who helped develop a curriculum that engaged kids in—for one teacher, he taught a unit on, was it manners almost and ideas on teaching them life skills outside the classroom. That was really beneficial and it let the students and teaches connect. Other students, you know, they had more hands on. They were trying to build the garden and do some gardening and do some other activities…that allowed them to see the teacher outside the classroom as a person and not just a figurehead in the classroom…the majority of the them [teachers] were willing to put in the extra work. They worked past their contract there. They were there before the day started and they’re putting the extra time in their teaching that was going on at the school…It was an incredible challenge that they took on and they all put that extra work in to do it. (P1)

Participant #3 expanded on these thoughts and acknowledged it takes conscious action to engage and work with students to build these relationships.

In between those times and between class times, I build a relationship with the kids by going out there at recess time and being present with them. Sometimes the girls will walk up to me and they’ll play with my hair and they’ll say, “Your hair is so long.” (P3)

Sharing another example, Participant #3 stated that another student might ask her:

Have you listened to my favorite song yet? And I said no, I haven’t…So, by the end of the week, finally, I listened to it three times so I could get the lyrics in my head so that I could be able to talk to her and have a better conversation about it.

Moreover, Participant #3 stated:

So, I’ll go out and do PE with them, and we’ll run around and we’ll race or we’ll do exercises in our common carpet area where kids will laugh, or in music we’ll laugh, or we’ll be goofy when we need to be. And I’ll act like them when I need
to be, just so they can see the dynamics and I think when they see like oh, she’s a real person, then it makes it better. (P3)

Several additional specific examples were documented by the participants whereby purposeful actions led to an increase in more positive connections with students. Participant #5 stated, “We’re trying to get you [student] to rebuild that connection with the teacher, so I’m going to let some things slide or we’re going to try to redirect it in a different way.” This response is indicative that sometimes the lack of a response to a student’s misbehavior, use of inappropriate language, or acting out behavior may also be a purposeful approach that leads to a teachable moment, rather than the application of discipline directed toward a poor behavior choice that may not teach a lesson. These subtle acts, and subtle degrees of inaction on the part of the staff, appear to be conscious decisions a number of teachers make to further the advancement of successes for students.

**Demonstrating care, compassion, and kindness, while at the same time depersonalizing students’ negative behaviors will better ready students in their efforts at facing adversity.** The interactions discussed by the participants included moments described as shared brief glances between teacher and students in the halls, where significant pieces of information are exchanged between both teachers and students within those glances, to full-blown discussions about the meaning of life that might occur as part of a classroom session, on any given day, given the circumstance of the day. Participant #4 provided a glimpse into the importance of each minute. During a moment of personal self-reflection thinking about what makes the difference in some
classes where students still have problems and others where they do not, participant #4 stated, in a bit of a flummoxed manner:

What is it? We have the same kids. We have the same, you know, time periods for our classes. What is the difference? What really is the difference? Because it’s not the kids. So it has to be the way that we’re conducting our classroom, that we’re managing our classrooms. So is it that I take the extra minute to calm down? Is it that I’m a little more forgiving on some things, you know? Kind of hey, I caught you sleeping. Get it together, let’s go. Or is it, you know, I don’t know and I can’t really put my finger on what the difference is exactly. But it’s, it’s crazy that the same problems happen in the same classes but not in other classes. So it has to be our expectations and what we’re doing. (P4)

A moment later, Participant #4 stated:

Like these kids have to feel loved. That’s the one thing I’m seeing with my kids, is if I’m the only person in their life that loves them, which might be true, then they’re going to act better for me than they would if they thought I hated them. I don’t know, just— you have to be accepting, kids are so different. (P4)

These following responses provide further evidence of the perceptions the staff had regarding the importance of being aware of each student, and how they are either in a moment of proximal development and ready to learn or the student may be stuck more in a fight or flight stage and need a moment to decompress. For example, one participant shared the following example for consideration:

And it’s a day-to-day thing. I think of a student who yesterday was not wearing her uniform shirt. And I literally, as I do with all the kids, you know, come to my office, let’s see what we can find for you to wear, you don’t have your shirt, and [she] bit my head off. Today she came back and she said, “I’m sorry. I — ran out of Prozac, and because our medical I can’t get any until November. I really apologize and I want to figure out what we can do because I’m really short-tempered.” And to me that was huge. And so really, in a nutshell, what I want to help support these kids in learning, it’s okay if you have a misstep. It’s coming back. It’s reflecting and coming back and going, you know what, that wasn’t appropriate. That’s not the way I want to be perceived. You know, what can we do to fix this and move forward? (P2)
One participant discussed how deeply she believed in seeking to understand where students are coming from and how she went about reminding herself to be aware and considerate of all the students:

You know, I was also thinking about kids that have felt disenfranchised by everywhere they’ve gone, you know, wherever they have been enrolled. And perhaps no one, or maybe not no one, but they haven’t had that teacher of counselor or whoever to really make that connection…And…we try to make that connection so that those messages of responsibility, those get through, or they understand and they accept it. I think that they, I don’t think always don’t understand, I think sometimes they learn to survive because they don’t have that connection, they’ve learned how to make excuses for themselves. But now, all of a sudden, they are taking ownership. (P6)

Participant #6 explained she believed students sometimes:

think that teachers generally don’t care, or at least that’s what they believed for a very long time, somebody made that connection with—you know, they’re able to go ahead and rebuild that trust. (P6)

Participants identified that, as a school community, one of their primary foci they had was on supporting the individual differences of their students though individual respectful interactions. Respondents confirmed this goal was further supported by a broader level of counseling services provided to students from the current school counselor and from outside service providers part of the wrap-around services at MGLC.

Participant #2 stated:

Well, our school, we have two STOP grants that we apply for every other year. One of them is called Project Support…it’s based on the needs of the kids. So the kids are hopefully comfortable enough sharing what their areas of need, whether it’s grieving, going through a divorce. We’ve had groups who are working with sexuality issues, gender identification, suicide, older brothers or parents having substance issues. And so we try to put together groups where our kids can comfortably talk about this or meet individually. We also have Youth and Family because many of our students have had issues with substance abuse…We really want to teach our kids to be self-reflective and to really know what it is they need. (P2)
Participants recognized that students have issues belonging with each student, and they made the point that as a group they worked to understand these facts about their students. The educational staff seeks to understand the potential trauma a student may have experienced, or may be going through. The staff works to build a broad understanding of each student’s life and to place each student’s issues into context, thus allowing the staff members to depersonalize many of their students’ poor behavior choices. Hence, when a student uses an inappropriate word, or even directs anger toward a staff member, the staff tries to understand that though they may be the recipient of the anger, they are truly not the primary focus of each student’s issues. Participant #3 shared that there were times she needed to take care of herself first to regroup:

I think just being resilient myself as a teacher. You need that skill because it could often get overwhelming when you’re dealing with behavioral issues or even dynamics in our own homes or trials and tribulations that we personally are going through. But if you make that separate from one another, home from work, but also getting myself that time to relax and have personal time. Which I think helps the kid a lot because when I’m fresh and ready to start new, then they feel that way too. (P3)

Further expanding on the belief that separating out a student’s issues from issues with you as a teacher, Participant #4 stated:

You know that the students, if they disappoint me, it’s not because they specifically went out to disappoint me or to make a bad choice, and that I have to take it no so personally…And I think as far as the kids are concerned, their lesson learned is they’re learning that they do need to be responsible…So, they’re learning that what’s right and what’s wrong. (P4)

The participants conveyed that taking the time to understand the multifaceted dimensions of each of their students helped them determine the best course of action to take for supporting that student with personal challenges. Whether that student’s issues are personal in nature, are reflective of a family situation, or in response to a situation
away from school, the effect the situation has on the student will impact his or her success. By taking the time to understand that situation, the educators shared they believed they could better address the needs of the student to deal with the adversity brought on by the situation.

**Striving to create relationships with students’ families, no matter what that family structure may appear to be, provides for a broader network of supports for each student.** Clearly, taking the time to not only reach students, but to include parents is pervasive across the educational staff. Participant #7 stated, “Initially as we come in, just building those relationships, getting to know our students, contacting families immediately. Contacting families immediately and keeping that real forward.”

Participant #6 stated, “We do a lot of parent conferences.” Providing a clearly articulated point on the matter, Participant #2 opined:

“I’ve seen is that when we have the parents, the guardians, the family on board, we have the opportunity to be successful in helping the student develop resiliency. And in those cases we’ve had, have some amazing, amazing stories of students who have, you know, failed the exit exams seven, eight times, and have finally passed it and are finally on their way going to junior college with goals of transitioning to UC. (P2)

Discussing how the school culture is beginning to morph and develop into a more cohesive unit, Participant #6 offered this insight:

Well, at least this year, it’s become more like a family because it’s such a small school. Everybody knows each other’s business, so just like a family, they know each other’s, they know who-what and what drama’s going on….we kind of relate our relationship or I talked to them, okay, how would you feel if your friend or who is like a cousin to you, you call them cousin, how would you feel if you were speaking, or they speaking, you know, we try to use our language. (P6)

In support of expanding relationships with parents, Participant #2 stated, “We bring parents into the picture a lot. We do a lot of parent involvement and getting
teachers together with parents for on-the-run meetings.” Observational data corroborating this perception is confirmed by this researcher. On one occasion, during a 30-minute visit to MGLC, Participant #2 was observed communicating with four different parent/guardians. Further detailing this actionable behavior, Participant #2 stated:

I had a student who’s new to us, a senior, who I noticed cutting class. And in a regular school, that student would probably just get a Saturday school notice in the mail. I called the parent and right on the run, I had the parent came in—come in with the students and used it as an opportunity as the student only has forty credits to go as: “You know, what is your plan? What do you want? How can we support you? (P2)

In support of the importance in making connections with families, Participant #7 stated it this way:

Initially, as we come in, just building those relationships, getting to know our students, contacting families immediately. Contacting families immediately and keeping that real, going forward…I send home progress reports every week, so there’s never a question on how my students are doing. (P7)

At the elementary level, Participant #3 conveyed the extreme importance of making connections with families within her classroom. She indicated that if she could get the parents to “buy-in” to the system, the chances of success for each of her students was dramatically increased.

And parents and guardians are always more than welcome to join us for our CPR circle [Circle of Power and Respect Advisory Program], all day if they want to, or at our community meeting, especially because this is where the students acknowledge one another for the positive things that they’ve done. So they’re able to build relationships with one another positively who are acknowledging each other in the meeting and we can call them in. (P3)

Further, demonstrating to students that their relationship with parents is important for their overall success was discussed by Participant #3:
They’ll say that if you do something, she’ll tell your parents, which is true and I think it is part of the relationship building is that they see me constantly talking and building a relationship with their parents and their guardians always welcoming them in. Anytime I can sit down with their parent or guardian and they’re present, I’m always talking about the things that they’re doing well and areas of concern. (P3)

**Supporting the development of student teamwork, broadening students’ awareness of perspectives of school/family networks, and fostering an organic process for school culture to development provides more opportunities for students to grow as people first.** A number of the participants shared the perspective that the students themselves have begun to connect on a number of different levels both inside and outside the classrooms. With respect to the expanding collective definition of what makes a “family” at MGLC, several participants stated strongly that the students have begun to view themselves as an extended family. Participant #4 stated:

> Our students are so protective of each other. It’s, it’s crazy, you know because, we do have fights. I’m not saying that there’s not, you know, some bad feelings in there…They’ll say even say that. We’re like a family. We’re like a family. Because it’s so small, they all know each other, they all know what’s going on with each other. They hang out at night. (P4)

When discussing the level of relationships that had begun to form between students, Participant #1 made an emphatic point and cited a significant result of teamwork:

And the relationships that they [students] were able to build inside of the class and with other adults that were on campus was pretty amazing and it showed academically. My sixth grade students performed on average higher than the district’s other middle school students in sixth grade on pretty much every benchmark…But the idea that they were able to outperform other comprehensive sites, to them that made them work harder for each other. And the relationship building that took place in the class with these students who were from different schools who had never known each other, you would never have guessed it by the end of the year that they had started out as strangers. They had the opportunity to work together for a goal, and the goal for the majority of them, at least the sixth
grade, was I wanted them to transition out of the school….And what ultimately worked for them was they knew that they were able to be successful and they would be afforded those things that other students take for granted at other schools. (P1)

Participant #3 also expressed that striving to get her class to function more as a team was an effective approach to supporting students to build their academic capacity. When referring to an academic challenge, participant #3 said:

And them getting really, really frustrated because they didn’t get it the first time around. And we would do it over and over again, but we would work through it as a team. And we would say okay, let’s just do ten questions, let’s get out of them as a class. And so, then we started to just build a team atmosphere. And I think that really helped because it became more about the team atmosphere than just one person, they started to get it. (P3)

A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders

The participants personally described the significant level of commitment each of them held for the success of the students, the school itself, and as a well-functioning team. These perceptions, communicated by each of their personal commitments, provides a glimpse into the high level of personal dedication each participant held for him or herself, provides an avenue for understanding the approach they needed to build each student’s personal commitments to themselves, and indicates how they strive to increase the students’ responsibility in order to reach their own success. Further, there is a presented belief that for the school to continue to find success, additional staff who come to the school to serve students must be committed to the overall success of the program, not be there just for a job. Commitment issues brought forth in the data focused on three main areas: a) There exist challenges to enlist, develop, and hold onto a committed, consistent education staff, who are collectively supportive of all students; b) Initiating and maintaining committed motivation from both students and their parents has been
The staff has had limited opportunities for collective professional meaningful staff development that allowed them the collaborative process needed to move forward as a school, especially in the first two formative years.

There exist challenges to enlist, develop, and hold onto a committed, consistent education staff, who are collectively supportive of all students. The participants identified a number of significant challenges experienced while planning for and providing services to students of the school at the inception of the implementation. One of the most widely discussed challenges included being able to recruit and retain educational staff that was able to sustain their motivation and personal commitment for working at MGLC. With limited prodding, Participant #1 initially began to discuss some perceptions related to challenges during the first few minutes of our interview. Many of the responses indicated participants perceived the original manner in which the school was filled with certificated staff did not provide the foundational support warranted to initially create an educational staff that was well-skilled, held broad skills and understanding for the population they would be serving, and were necessarily ready to be building a new culture at MGLC.

One of the things that was difficult with starting process is there’s a few of us who were already employed in the District, and getting released from our first jobs was difficult, So there was only three or four people who were on the ground level initiating the standards and protocols and the procedures that were going to be taking on and coming up with the programs that were going to be offered. (P1)

Participant #1 continued:

Starting in the middle of the year taking on elementary students wasn’t as hard, but taking on middle school and high school students who were on a credit system or who were coming from a different school and we had to convert credits or units into what was equivalent at out site or how we were going to do that was very difficult….I’d say you really didn’t get your feet under you until midway through
the second quarter or even third quarter just because, personally, I started out with two kids in a class. v(P1)

Challenges related to staff turnover; obtaining and holding onto committed, effective staff members; and the need to utilize substitutes to cover classes were mentioned extensively by a number of participants as major concerns and major challenges as the program was getting underway. Participant #1 offered the following response:

Certain teachers were able to hold kids accountable. They were able to progress through the academic schedule. They were able to progress through the system and did improve areas, but they were also struggling in other classes, in those classes where the teacher didn’t make it an obligation to hold the kids responsible. They expected somebody else to. It didn’t work. They ran rampant and also never showed up at that point. And a lot of it had to do with being able to hold on the teachers for the next period of time. There were a lot of teachers who were able to make it for part of the year and then ended up having to leave for one reason or another, and then trying to fill those roles with a qualified teacher who have their special education credential and their single subject or multiple subject credential at the same time. There wasn’t a large enough pool to select teachers from, and so you ended up spending about half the year with guest teachers. (P1)

Additionally, Participant #1 stated:

As well as the students fluctuating quite a bit, the staff fluctuated quite a bit. Not having the right people in positions and not necessarily having people in position and/or trying to fill them [teaching assignments] more using guest teachers and substitute teachers along the way. (P1)

Similar sentiments regarding identified challenges with holding onto committed, effective staff were shared by several participants. The difficulty in starting a new program seemed to be exacerbated by the reality of a revolving staff at MGLC during the formative year.

Then our other big challenge we face is turnover, teacher turnover. It’s just ridiculous. And I, you know, I don’t fault anybody for going to, to new schools or whatever. Everybody’s happy, it’s fine. But the people that come in and are just like me, I can’t take it. I can’t handle it. I mean I’m glad that they admit that, but
at the same time it throws everybody else. You know, it’s not for everybody else. (P4)
There was a lot of substitutes that were in many of the classrooms, long-term subs. So, there was a lot of inconsistency. And you would hear this a lot, kind of from many teachers, oh, there’s a lot of inconsistency and I think because staffing was a problem. (P6)

Having a revolving education staff defined as individuals lacking in presence, lacking strong commitment to serve this population of student, and who seemed to not seriously engage in wanting to support all students presented as a significant barrier for finding the initial success of the staff they believed was beginning to occur. Though identified as being a challenge, and as a detriment to some of the needed cultural organic growth, there was a noted change in the responses received specific to the start of the 2012-2013 school year. Participants’ responses were more reflective that now, as the start of the 2012-2013 school year was upon them with a more consistent group of people with a higher level of commitment for being at MGLC, and with a more collaborative approach to everything, that more positive things were occurring for students. Participant #6 elaborated on this newly emerging perception. She stated:

I mentioned earlier the inconsistency was definitely a challenge. And I think because we were trying so many things that it was-we were throwing so many different ideas and what we needed—and what we are doing a little bit better this year (2012-2013) is to choose three main areas that fit into our philosophy at Matt Garcia. And then build on that. (P6)

Expanding on this perception, both Participant #5 and #6 in their dual interview shared similar issues and points. Participant #5 stated, “There was a lack of cohesion with the staff members, which kind of carried over onto the students.” Then Participant #6 chimed in without missing a beat:

They felt the effects, and I think because the students-they are not naïve. They see everything. They can-they’re actually a really good barometer for how it’s going
between teachers and staff. And I think that they don’t have that—let me think of a
good description. They have more confidence in the people that are directing and
not just inside the classroom, but outside. (P6)

**Initiating and maintaining committed motivation from both students and**
their parents has been extremely difficult. Participants discussed that even though
many of the students recognize that being able to attend MGLC may allow them to
continue coming to school rather than be expelled, or that instead of being simply
forgotten on a high school campus, they could actually attend classes with a lower
staffing ratio, for many students and their parents, the initial commitment, excitement,
and or even relief that they could attend the school was lost soon after starting at MGLC.
Being able to capitalize on the initial excitement a student and/or family might feel was
described as a significant challenge by the participants. When discussing this concern
Participant #2 shared:

There is a certain little type [teachers] that I’ve identified who really feel that they
have to take care of the babies, so to speak, and become their friends. And that is
a definition of how you meet an at-risk student as opposed to being a positive role
model, having rigor and supporting the kids in-right into the challenge and doing
the work that’s you know, expected of a sixth grader or an eighth grader or a
twelfth grader. So that has been a challenge because I you are a special ed, or
math or science, you don’t have to get another credential in order to find a job in
most areas. (P2)

Two participants focused their responses directly on working with the population
of the school and their parents when addressing speaking about the challenge with
creating sustainable motivation. Participant #8 offered the following insight:

I think the biggest challenge for me has been motivating students who’ve been
unsuccessful for years and years and years. And so, the biggest challenge has
been taking kids who are-who have been habitually truant, who haven’t been
successful, who have a huge number of coping mechanisms, and trying to get
them to see that they can succeed academically in school if, if we can work on
these things. And I think that was a challenge…You know, working with kids
who need academic scaffolds isn’t that difficult. But kids who have really this deeply ingrained sense, ingrained sense of not being successful, that motivation piece has been probably the, the hardest part. (P8)

Moreover, Participant #7 explained that striving to comprehend this difficulty weighed on her mind, and has led to a continuation of reflection to attempt to seek solutions to this problem:

One of the challenges…how to get that small fragment of our population, how to get that buy-in, not only from our students but from our parents as well. And I think that’s one of the most difficult challenges because what I’ve noticed is if parents are on the ball, the students are involved and they’re more likely to be successful. It’s parents that we can’t really readily reach or contact of get to come in to discuss even the most minor issues, which is parent conferences or grades, or whatever it may be. It’s those students that I’ve been, that I’m most concerned about because I see the correlation between parental involvement and student success. So, most of my students that are faltering are the ones who there is not much parental involvement. (P7)

The staff had limited opportunities for collective professional meaningful staff development that allowed them the collaborative process needed to move forward as a school, especially in the first two formative years. Those participants initially present when the doors of MGLC opened focused some of their responses on that initial time. They discussed that they had limited abilities to work as a team of educators to plan the overall academic operation for the school. This sentiment was often relayed through Participant #1’s responses. There was a sense of frustration that even though they were excited to be starting a new program, though supported by the central office administration, and though being on the ground floor of this endeavor, it was very difficult to feel successful. Participant #1 shared:

So, you really never had the opportunity to build a community in your classroom at the start. The doors were open with kids coming in and out. I’m not sure what the program was going to be or how it was going to be offered that it took a while. So, I’d say most of the work that was put in the first year was trial by fire. (P1)
In response to the challenges with initiating strategies as a school and sustaining their success for all students, Participant #1 shared some significant frustrations with the early stages of development of the program:

Most of the strategies, I would say, depended on the teacher. That was probably one of the toughest things that we had to do as a staff was we never really had the ability or had the time inside the work or before work gets started to sit down and talk about individual students and how we’re going to be able to help them. We had applied for the collaboration process and they had minimum days in collaboration. However, the teacher who had applied didn’t fill the paperwork in correctly and so that was never granted to us as far as the collaboration opportunity which would have allowed to sit down and talk about students and work with students. (P1)

More directly, Participant #1’s responses indicated the perception that though the idea of creating the MGLC was a positive and important one, in Participant #1’s opinion, concerns about opening the doors of the school took precedent over building the right culture with the right staff. Thus, not having a collective clear vision or delineation of duties and expectations of what was to really be accomplished by the educational staff may have created some confusion for the initial staff members, rather than if they had a clearly defined program on which they could build.

I think the biggest problem was there wasn’t necessarily a game plan on how we were going to open the school? It was how are we going to get stuff in our classrooms. It was how are we going to get enough kids, to just having the school. Those things were put into place in the very beginning. And then once we got the kids, it was like good luck, now make sure they’re successful. And so, I don’t think there was ever the conversation on what are you going to do in your classroom. How are you going to change these students so they are successful? Or, how are you going to give them the opportunity to change themselves? Resiliency was one of those things where we were really looking for. I think the plan from the beginning was they were looking for outside sources to take that piece on by themselves where it was something that we actually have to have an internal discussion about because the ones we say there every day and the ones who spent the majority of their day with them were the teachers. And if we weren’t going to take responsibility for that, then how would that work? (P1)
When the doors of MGLC opened, the original design of the school was expanded to include second through 12th-grade students. Attempting to serve this wide swath of grade levels with a limited number of educators created another difficulty in being able to provide grade-level specific professional development and expanded opportunities for collaboration among the staff. Thus, not only was it difficult to meet the needs of the students, but it was a challenge to target and provide the supports warranted by the staff to advance the students’ particular skills.

Wow! Well one of the biggest ones [challenges] was having a second through twelfth school was really biting off too much because there are such unique needs developmentally for the little guys, the second, third, you know, fifth graders, so it’s really helped to have the sixth through twelfth configuration. The other thing I’ve really learned, we have had a philosophy, come one come all, and we have a number of students who are eighteen and nineteen. And, what I’ve really found is these kids often see themselves as adults, and it’s very, very hard. And some of them are on their own, living in various housing situations or some of them are homeless—it’s very, very hard. (P2)

The participants’ responses are further reflective that the shared perceptions from the staff present during the early stages of development of the school was that MGLC was simply trying to do too much for too many types of students of various ages and levels of development. The original concept of the school, that has since been modified, was identified as one of the reasons the staff responded. But there was a lack of shared commitment to a focused program, difficulty with collaboration, and far too broad of an expectation that they could assist all students with all needs. Given the large spread of population initially at the school, second through 12th grade, the limited professional education staff was pulled in a number of different ways. Though each of them was trying to meet the needs of their specific group of students, they report not having a confirmed clear mission by which to move them forward and reported that the
overwhelming expectations placed on them was a bit of a frustration. Thus, the lack of perceived commitment may be more a reflection of being over-committed, rather than not having any commitment to the advancement of the students and or the school.

**Communication is an Essential Element**

A prevailing, dominant theme cutting across all participants’ responses was that communication is essential at all levels of the planning, development, and day-to-day functioning of the school and is a primary strategy by which to create positive effects for students. Essential may not be a strong enough descriptor to indicate the level of importance the respondents reported the strategy of communication to be as they discussed the successes occurring at MGLC. As a teaching tool, a way to connect with students as people first, and as a skill being developed in each student, communication was seen as a primary foundational component for many of the successes their students may find. The terms: talking, conversing, discussing, listening, reflecting with, and providing feedback to, were found over and over again in the responses of the participants to describe communication. One primary sub-finding is identified with which to further understand the data: Communicating with and providing feedback to students is an essential component to connecting with and reaching students to broaden their self-awareness and perspective.

**Communicating with and providing feedback to students is an essential component to connecting with and reaching students to broaden their self-awareness and perspective.** All eight participants appeared to be sincerely personally compassionate in their responses to questions focused on increasing their students’ resiliency levels by means of communication. A few came close to tears as they
discussed the impact they have had on students during their time at MGLC. Many of them relayed a general awareness that one of the primary directives for the staff was to support students in becoming resilient and reiterated they often took time to talk to students about their own resiliency and anticipation of student success. In response to questions of resiliency, descriptive strategies of process and educators’ perceptions of those strategies, responses were reflective of these points.

We talk every day about being resilient…and, so, being resilient is coming to school. Coming to school, even though what may be happening at home. And oftentimes, I’ll share my personal experiences with them, and I’ll say when I was going to school, I’d say, it was hard because my parents were always fighting. And I said, but something that I had to do was go to school, make that my positive outlet because that was my ticket to one day not having to listen to it, and having to get to live on my own. (P3)

Another respondent shared a similar perception that working at MGLC took more effort than simply being a teacher. She explained it took a conscious understanding that one was doing more than assisting students to acquire an academic skill, or learn a new word, but that it takes a full scope of the needs of these students and a desire to impact more than their specific skills. Impassioned, Participant #4 spoke:

That’s kind of my whole thing, to teach them how to, I, I always tell them like, I’m here to teach you math or whatever, but I’m also here to teacher you how to be a person. So, you know, what could you have done better in this situation? Let’s go back. Okay, let’s say this, let’s do this little bit or role playing. Let’s, you know, I’ve pulled kids out in the hall and they’re like, what, what, and, what were you thinking? What could we have done better? Okay, let’s go try it again. (P4)

The perceptions expressed indicate that not only are the educators in MGLC aware of the need to provide high rigor and high academic expectations for their students, but they reported it was part of their personal collective responsibility to speak to, converse with, and provide feedback to students in order to broaden their perspectives of
themselves as developing people who are on their way to adulthood. Understanding the importance of communicating with students, providing students with feedback regarding their actions, and initiating and maintaining an evolving dialogue with each student throughout the day, was reported to be an essential strategy described by the participants. The educators discussed the importance of engaging students in the art of self-reflection. They stated that by supporting students to empower themselves to make better choices, they are building personal responsibility skills for each student. They indicated that by helping students develop achievable goals and then helping students reach those goals, they believe they are building the desire to succeed in each student.

Just basic communication and stuff like that. I don’t think we have something that we like hold onto like a curriculum or anything, just trying to get them to be people, just to understand feelings and what it takes to be successful. (P4)

Similar sentiments were echoed by participant #7 as she spoke of having classroom meetings where communication was utilized to exchange information, open up lines of communication, and clarify any concerns going on in the classroom.

In addition, in the classroom, specifically, my classroom, we have times that are tied within the classroom where we talk about issues like this. So, we have classroom meetings approximately two to three times a week where we talk about different issues…Having people they can talk to, I mean, yes, they do come and talk to me. (P7)

Participant # 6 concurred regarding the importance of conversation and expanded on the need to provide clear, pertinent feedback to students. According to Participant #6:

I know a couple of classrooms onsite are already talking to students-or doing actual lessons and tying it into the curriculum and helping them to their responsibility, learning about a job, learning how to prepare for high school if they are in middle school; for a job if they’re a high school student, or for college. (P6)
Participant #8 supported the notion that through conversation and spending time discussing issues of concern with students, students seem to truly respond and demonstrate more resolve in focusing on their personal responsibility. Participant #8 explained:

And at some point, there has to be some personal responsibility on the part of the student. We have a lot of conversations about that with kids with amongst teachers. And we try really hard to talk with each other over the course of each day if we’re having those conversations with kids so that other, other teachers can reinforce it. (P8)

Teachers taking time to provide students with perspectives of their behavior is cited as another strategy used on a day-to-day basis. Participants spoke of the need to teach students the skill of reflection as a tool with which to broaden their self-understanding. Participant #6 discussed the importance of reflection, and the importance of the staff to be clear when providing feedback to students.

And I think the idea of reflecting on their behavior is really important. To reflect on what was done because they’re very impulsive, and so that what they – you know, and you don’t really stop to think about what it is or the consequences of what’s going to happen. And so hopefully with that reflection, they’re able to kind of gain an ability to maybe stop themselves before something happens and really kind of—and prevent it. (P6)

Supporting this idea, Participant #8 enunciated the need to be very specific and clear with feedback to students:

Trying to be really specific with each other about what it is that we’re seeing a student maybe do or what we’re hearing from a certain student on a certain day and to be really specific about what feedback I gave a student so that other teachers can, can help support the feedback that I had given them…the conversations are as private as possible, but that’s not always as private as we wish they could be…What is it, this constant difficulties or something outside of school or is it something inside the school? Is it something that I can help with academically or socially, you know, what is it? Where is it coming from so that we know what we’re working with, I guess. (P8)
Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone

Participants believed the systems they initiated were important to setting the tone for students and staff and were assisting in developing the overall culture of the school. Whether discussing the initial induction phase of the process, the way in which students accomplish work, or the protocol for wearing student uniforms, the educational staff supported the notion of importance and meaning in their protocols, and when students follow these protocols, more opportunities abound for all their students. The two prevailing significant themes that emerged in the data follow: a) Providing students with consistent protocols to follow during their tenure at the school and logical consequences for their actions supports them in developing personal responsibility and b) Offering clear information, providing flexible choices within the set protocols, and providing differentiation and adaptation to day-to-day fluctuations in students’ needs provides for more opportunities to increase success for students.

Providing students with consistent protocols to follow during their tenure at the school and logical consequences for their actions supports them in developing personal responsibility. All eight participants stated in similar fashion that, as a school, there was a focus on providing students with the skills needed to function as students. Participant #2 discussed specific protocols used by the staff as part of the induction phase for new students. “One of the first things that we do is have an interview process where me meet with students and the families.” The interview protocol and contract is identified as A-11 in the Artifacts (see Appendix D) and guided this conversation. Participant #2 stated that the conversations sometimes put a student on the spot as the interview focused on the specific issues that brought the student to this point in time and
the reasons behind coming to MGLC. Participant #2 indicated they tried and shared with the student the following perspective, “So, it’s really that kind of inward journey of who am I and how do I want to proceed in my life?” Participant #2 discussed what might occur as part of the induction process:

We try to catch them at school and teach them to go, “You know what, this is the behavior that has led me to cut school or to say something inappropriate to my teacher and get a consequence. What can I do to build some inner strength and reflective ability and how can I ask for support in getting there?” And so we have what we would call wrap-around-services which are really there to help support the student in developing this resiliency. (P2)

The process of inducting students has gone through a number of transitions, as has the school. While it is true that holding initial interviews with students to review their potential admittance to the school, followed by the completion of the parent/student contract, has remained a constant part of the process. These primary procedures have evolved since the school’s inception. Indicating that this process was not clearly defined at the start, Participant #1 stated:

At the end of the first year, we actually really got to sit down and come up with new programs and how we’re going to implement it and how we’re going to work as a staff because as well as students fluctuating quite a bit, the staff fluctuated quite a bit.” Participant #1 also discussed some of the basic strategies of the school, “come to a place where there would be rigorous expectations…they’d be wearing the uniform every day…they would maintain a certain level of responsibility at the school and in the community. (P1)

A number of the participants collectively shared they believed that as a school, as an educational staff, and as a body of individuals moving forward together, they try to be consistent but also felt the need to be more comprehensively “Consistent.” They meant that even though the staff indicated that, as a group, they felt they had an idea about how things should work and the importance of providing consistent protocols for the students
to follow, the details and consistency of practice had yet to permeate the entire culture of the school. Participant #2 stated, “We have a school-wide positive support system for behavior, and it’s really built on best practices of Marzano.” Further detailing this opinion, Participant #2 indicated:

Teachers and students develop some expectations, you know, the way we walk down the hallway, the way we act when we go in the classroom. And along those lines, we’ve also developed areas, for instance, in the classroom, every classroom has an area called a time away. So our hope and expectation is that a student will self-identify: you know what, I’m feeling like I might have a little issue, I’m going to go sit in this quiet corner and work quietly. (P2)

In agreement, Participant #8 voiced that the staff worked to provide consistency of practice as a goal for all instructors to support students in using similar strategies in class to find success. She indicated:

I think one of the things that we do is we try to provide a consistent environment in our classrooms and a consistent environment across the school. So that they, students, can become, to understand that what we do, what I learn to do in one class, I can take that information and it can become, or I can take that process and I can become better and more confident across all of my classes. (P8)

When discussing the importance of the staff working together to create an atmosphere where each student mattered and where the educational staff was all on the same page, Participant #8 stated:

We’re working really hard on consistent rules and consistent expectations that we have. We reinforce. We follow through in every classroom. We have procedures in place in a number of classrooms that we try to replicate just in terms of, you know, where you find your materials, what are-the expectations as soon as you come into school or into class…recently, we’ve been working on what are our similar lesson objectives so the kids always know what that language is going to sound like. (P8)

The participants identified a number of specific strategies of practice emphasized by many of the educators of the school. These strategies are not dictated as “have to”
strategies by the site administrator but are strategies that have been initiated by one or more teachers to support the needed consistency of the students. Participant #8 elaborated:

I have seen a lot of responsibility taken on by students. They know for instance that they have to make a list of things when they are gone. And every student, virtually every student will come to me after they think for a while and say, okay, I need to have make-up work. We keep an interactive notebook, and they know how their notebook has to be complete when they turn it in...I think they are taking a great deal of responsibility for the work...I think also in terms of learning things. And I think they realize it's not just the time. You know, you're successful when you master information and when you learn something. And I think they are taking more responsibility for actually doing things. (P8)

Though Participant #7 came to the interview process with relatively limited teaching experience when compared to some of the other professional education staff, Participant #7 shared:

I think modeling is definitely one of the key strategies we use as educators. We come every day and it's a brand new situation, and we oftentimes have to change from day-to-day. So definitely modeling resiliency...So, just teaching them if you do make a mistake, own up to it, and also, I think that's how we're at this point, dealing with helping students to be able to take responsibility for their actions. (P7)

Participant #4 boldly proclaimed there were a number of strategies she held in high regard, used with consistency, and believed helped her limit a student’s ability from escaping the need to improve their skills, achieve credits, or shirk their personal responsibility for moving themselves forward.

Student’s responsibility, well we make them. We each have charts in our rooms so they can chart their credits...so, then they know exactly all the time where they are, “Oh, I got one credit, and two, I didn’t get credit three, what could I do to make me go back and go get credit three?” So, we make them responsible for their, for their learning to a point, you know. (P4)
Similar strong perceptions were shared by Participant #4 in other areas of her responses, “We teach them how to be people.” Further, Participant #4 answered “they just need to stop and bring it back to themselves” when discussing how students sometimes get off-track with issues that do not pertain to them and how she really directed them to be selfish and bring the focus back to themselves, rather than be distracted by the issues of other people. She indicated that attempts to convey to her students that if they became stronger as individuals, the better they would then be to assist others and that might be a better time to focus on the needs of others, after they have advanced themselves.

And to try to learn that on your own is hard for these kids, for all kids, especially these kids. Just take a minute to stop and like, what am I doing? Try not to get so wrapped up in the, in the high school drama. (P4)

Several of the participants indicated that some of the basic strategies to support each of the students initiated within the school seemed to be gaining momentum this school year. Participant #4 stated:

The more responsible with their uniforms, picking up trash around campus, things like that. I’ve seen homework completion had gone up, I do believe. I can’t speak for every class, but I think it’s gone up…they actually feel like they can succeed so they’re actually going to try. (P4)

Participant #3, whose primary focus is on the elementary level of MGLC, which has subsequently moved to another physical location at the start of the 2012-2013 school year, shared a unique perspective directly connected to the elementary students, currently fourth and fifth graders. “Well, the first thing is we hold them accountable to a contract.” She indicated that each of the students and parent signs the contract and is held
accountable for their actions on a daily basis. Second, she indicated she utilized literature to convey important messages.

The second thing is we always talk about this poem; it’s called, *The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost. And we talk about that the right choices to make can be the hard road to take sometimes. And that you may see your friends, you know, taking an easier path, but that doesn’t mean you have to go too. Sometimes it’s going to be really tough, and in that one moment, in that instant, you have to decide which one do you want to take. And we talk about those two roads. And what’s happened to people we know of and what we think will happen to us if we go down those roads. (P3)

Participant #3 indicated a strong resolve to not get down on the students and to continue to pursue optimal learning opportunities for all of her students. She stated that one of the primary consistent approaches she used to engage students was to advance the idea that the culture of the school belongs to them, and that, by choice, they can either create a positive experience for themselves or easily create a place of frustration.

And it showed that they were able to overcome a lot of different dynamics. One of the main ones being that we were building an ongoing culture of being positive, but at the same time, we were getting student at any given moment who could disrupt the culture, which, which happened often, but still maintain that sense of academic resiliency was so surprising to me. (P3)

**Offering clear information, providing flexible choices within the set protocols, and providing differentiation and adaptation to day-to-day fluctuations in students’ needs provides for more opportunities to increase success for students.**

When discussing the uniqueness that occurs at MGLC, many of the participants stated they found the standard approach to teaching they might have utilized in other general education settings would not be fruitful with this student population. They indicated it is not that these students were not capable, bright, or intelligent, but that they simply called for a different approach. The participants discussed that an approach based on flexibility,
adaptation, change, and making connections with students was a primary goal required in finding success for these students. Simply put, the staff indicated that making the education meaningful to students became the primary objective, and to do that, they first needed to connect with students via flexible means.

Participant #8 discussed one strategy she believed supported the provision of flexibility to students was to provide time. By providing time, in terms of opportunities to make up homework, assignments, and even credits, students were afforded more opportunities to acquire the skills they needed, rather than be subjected to more failure. She explained that students were not ridiculed or punished for being away from school, but were responded to in a respectful manner isolating the real issues from perceived issues, and focusing on logical consequences for being away from school. She indicated that if getting the credits is the goal, then acquiring credits by actually completing the work becomes the goal to be able to move forward in school.

We give students time, to make things up, to complete credits when they’ve been absent...let them know that what they’re doing is important and that there is no final, final. (P8)

Participant #6 stated:

We’re helping them to learn the basics of how they’re supposed to behave. When it’s appropriate to do things and when it’s not appropriate. And, they’re smart kids, they just their timing is very different than the rest of the kids. (P6)

Striving to serve students from a wide variety of backgrounds is no easy feat. In fact, being able to maneuver from high academic functioning students to an average skilled student to a struggling student requires a great deal of thoughtful strategy on the part of an instructor with regard to effectively providing instruction to all of them.
Participant #6 stated the following with respect to a lesson learned about being flexible while teaching at MGLC:

And, so I’m understanding what it really, truly means, to be differentiated-differentiated in the classroom. I’ve learned that with the kids who have—who are learning to become resilient, learning to overcome challenging situations that they need me, the teacher, the most. They just-so I think the lesson learned for me, personally, is that to not take a student, you know, their overreaction to a certain situation personally. This is who they are, expect them, figure out a plan to help them. Don’t kind of-don’t judge them right away, figure out what worked and what doesn’t work. (P6)

Participants’ responses reflect an understanding that to be flexible, to have dynamic teaching occur, one has to be ready to change the planned lesson of the day with limited notice and head into another direction to benefit students. For some teachers, this might be a very difficult process, but for teachers at MGLC this type of adaptation occurs with significant frequency.

I think the whole idea of don’t take things personally because they’re [students] very reactive, so they say whatever comes to their mind. And you can’t take it personally. And I think one of the biggest-one of the things I learned is that tomorrow is a new day, and you have to continue, and you have to be able to let go of what happened the day before. You know, they may have had a blow out…and we have to kind of let that go and not hold it against them. (P5)

**It’s a Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes**

As each interview was concluding, the participants were asked to prospectively reflect on how they believed the lessons learned, the challenges they identified, the experiences they lived through, and the practices they have implemented thus far, might inform future strategies that might be further implemented to support students as they continued on their academic journeys. Much of what the data set provides is representational of an extensive number of responses focusing on the future of MGLC.

Two primary themes emerged in response to the educational staff’s thinking about how to
improve and expand the educational opportunities for students: a) Continue to focus on new and evolving strategies that will continue to build collaborative processes and b) Success is a relative term, and each success should be recognized and celebrated.

**Continue to focus on new and evolving strategies that will continue to build collaborative processes.** It is apparent the staff understood they have been engaged in a process of development that is far from finished. There is a collective recognition that to support students in developing personal commitment to improving their attendance, increasing their academic success, and reaching personal milestones, they must be provided with expanding opportunities for success while they are associated with MGLC. Having a new school site; holding on to a more grounded, committed, and consistent staff; and moving forward with new site leadership has afforded another chance for breakthrough with which the educational professionals can continue to build on previous successes.

Understanding that this is a “Specialized School” a “School of Choice” and not a standard alternative school is not lost upon the staff. That being said, as they responded with forward thinking analysis, they focused on several similar strategies they believed were necessary for moving their culture of MGLC forward and collectively indicated they were ready for change.

**Targeting time for collaboration among the staff is a key element supported by several participants.** Being provided the time to work together, time to discuss intentions, time to reflect on their success, time to analyze their difficulties, time to understand what has been accomplished and where they have fallen short, and time to plan their next steps and steps after that are seen as tremendous needs for the staff.
I think that Matt Garcia [Learning Center], I think that this year they do have a chance to make a huge amount of growth with the separation of the high school, the middle school, and the separation of the elementary school…If they find the right people to work there and they’re given the opportunity to collaborate and they use that time to really sit down and focus on the students instead of what they are supposed to be teaching in the class, they’ll realize that that ends up being more beneficial in the long run. So with collaboration, with hopefully leadership possibilities that are there in the future for someone to come in and help and take over, they do have some of the framework to be successful, but I think it’s going to be more starting over. (P1)

Elaborating on this idea, the importance of building capacity across all the education staff was identified as an essential component of the future success hoped for at the school. As yet another transition is underway, retirement of the current principal, and selection of a new principal, Participant #2’s response further broadened the base of this argument and was apropos.

Well, you know, building capacity. And one of the things I’m working on now is really ensuring that the systems are not dependent on me, but that there’s multiple people who are involved with that. Because in order to sustain itself, any school, but especially a little specialty school like this, needs to have a body of people who have kind of the institutional knowledge and the set of strategies and the opportunity to, to employ those and to, to build and to go in, you know, different directions perhaps with that. I’ve already done a lot of that with, you know, input on newsletters and decision making on-with students and master schedule and all of those things. It’s got to be a collaborative consensus building process. It’s not dependent on me or on one little group of people. (P2)

Moreover, Participant #2 was proud of the work that had been accomplished thus far with respect to collaboration:

It’s extremely rewarding when we collaboratively have been able to assist a student and the family in, in meeting with success sometimes for the first time in their life. It’s extremely rewarding to get the accolades from the accreditation, California Department of Education. We just received the, the three-year accreditation. It’s just very rewarding. So I would say that it’s been extremely rewarding, and it’s been challenging at the same time. (P2)
As she was reflecting on the process that occurred to get them to this point, Participant #6 mentioned that much of the collaboration has been through “on the go” activity. Though purposeful and meaningful, the time to collaborate has come from movement, not necessarily from stability. Hence, the staff has not necessarily had the time to sit, think, and plan things out with much dedicated time, but rather through a process of quick decisions and choices.

I think we are always thinking about future projects and future strategies. I have like a list going. But, I think that also being willing to adapt to a situation…There is on the go planning. This is a flexible planning situation, we’re on the go collaborating, we’re on the go and it’s true. You have to be willing to work with the situation, work with the problem, work with a solution on the go. And I think the lesson learned is if you resist to that, it’s going to be a long road. And if you are willing to adapt, and to kind of improvise, and, we’re always teaching our kids to improvise. (P6)

Participants recognize that not only being provided time to collaborate is an unfilled priority, but that they are not working to develop a static plan; rather, they must focus on developing a dynamic plan that is adaptable, organic, and able to flex based upon the needs of their students. Whether the focus is on stretching the ability for resilience, expanding on the abilities of students to demonstrate responsibility, or fostering relationships that will support the desired success for students in life, participants continue to search for ways to make things better for students.

I guess, I think we’re still looking for more ways to teach our students to be more resilient. What else can we possibly implement? How else can we possibly—because with the population here that we’re dealing with, this will be essentially important to get, so, just looking for ways to teach them to become more resilient citizens, or students, and good people. (P7)

Expanding on this idea of continuous reflection, thoughtful planning, and potential improvement, Participant #8 elaborated:
Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think I am finding what works with different kids. When I say different kids, I don’t mean specific student, but with different groups of kids and kids who share similar issues, or, or strengths, or, you know, problems, whatever it is. I think, I think being in the situation you learn and hopefully kind of keep track of what’s working, use what working more and what didn’t work less. Kids are really honest with this. I think about, about what’s working for them and how it’s going. And, and sometimes they’re not –sometimes they’re honest with us in very covert ways, but they’re still letting us know what’s, what’s working for them and what’s not. (P8)

**Success is a relative term, and each success should be recognized and celebrated.** Better yearly attendance, more homework completion, credit attainment, and fewer suspensions are all valid goals for students that are commonly held by teachers. However, at MGLC, waiting for measured success for these types of seemingly long-range goals is reported as not the most important way to monitor success on a day-to-day basis for students. More so, seeing individual students display an increase in minutes on task, less hostility directed at other students, less frustration with completing academic assignments, more willingness to engage in conversations that lead to expanding their personal perceptions about their own behavior, and engage in a multitude of other positive behaviors are often a cause for significant celebration for the educational professional. The staff recognized that for students to be able to develop and set long-range goals, they must first be able to set, find success in, and recognize their success with smaller, incremental goals.

For the purposes of this study, the participants were asked to identify and discuss one particular student who resonated with them as they reflected on their time at MGLC. Though the number of success stories they could tell as a group could potentially fill another dissertation study, the data below are limited to just one shared situation for each participant. The examples illustrated below demonstrate the varied and important work
being accomplished at MGLC every day in the form of real-life incremental success steps
that are part of each student’s transformation.

Some of the students who took the challenge on, some of the students who put the
work in, who tried to buy into the program, it was amazing to watch and they did
become more resilient to what was going on around them…One student…he’s
now at Johnson [Middle School Pseudonym]…He had to figure out was he going
to be resilient and let his mom know that you have to get me up every day. You
have to get me to school…He had to let mom know that she wasn’t going to be
able to hold him back and he was going to be able to do it. (P1)

I have a student who we graduated last June. And she was almost nineteen years
old, had been kicked out of home, and her disabled older sister had been kicked
out as well. And so she arranged for them to move to Section 8 housing. And,
we didn’t really know if we were going to be able to help her graduate literally
until two days before graduation. She’s now going to City College in San
Francisco. (P2)

His name is Billy [pseudonym]…the trigger for him is that he is very low in math.
Basic timetables, he couldn’t do…And when it came to math, I knew I had to be
sitting side by side next to him. He had to feel my presence and know that I was
going to help with him on it…my thing was getting that trigger to be less for him
and to build confidence so that he could be successful…So this year, when we got
his CST [California Standards Test] results back, he was seven points short of
being proficient. (P3)

I had a kid named David, [pseudonym]…his discipline file is crazy, crazy. And
this kid-you never saw him. Always in uniform, always on time, always polite,
ever mean to anyone, everyone likes him. No fights, nothing. And I remember
the very first back to school night we had…And his grandma came and she just
broke down in the hallway and started crying, because she was like, “I just can’t
believe all these good things that people are saying about, about my grandson.”
And it was like: What? He’s a good kid. What are you talking about? What do
you mean? She’s like, “I never heard a good comment from a teacher ever.” (P4)

He went back over to Crystal [Middle School]. And he-I thought for sure I’d see
him in a month back because he just hadn’t quite-I didn’t think he hadn’t quite
learned the self-control that he needed to be back in the classroom. But he made
it. He’s still over there…So, I’m hoping that he has grown. He made tremendous
progress as far as his behavior from when I got there to when I left. And a lot of
it was just using different strategies. And with him, as far as controlling his
language. And giving him alternatives, that was a big thing, alternatives in the
classroom. (P5)
The student I’m speaking of, part of it is that-I would think that there’s a lot of success compared to where he started…he was just an overflow of issues that were kind of happening just in the way he interacted with students, and it was just the constant fighting. And his attitude towards each subject was, oh, I hate math, I hate math. I can’t do this. I can’t do that…He just completed his two semesters…He found a connection in science. He learned that he loved science…And so, it was just-to get him to go from where, I hate this, I’m not good at this, what’s the point? I can’t trust anybody…but, at least he has grown from having a real negative attitude towards to at least wanting to give it a try. (P6)

Last year for instance, the formatives we take weekly, I just did not see-it just did not appear that the student was mastering a lot of the content. This year, she’s very motivated. She has been either proficient or advanced on many of the formatives. So, I can see a correlation between that resilience and academic success. She has really blossomed in not only her, her personal relationships, but also academically. So I can see that-in not only her, but maybe in others. It seems like once they’re able to get over a lot of the emotional issues that are occurring with them, they can focus then on learning, on academics. So this year, I can really see an increase. We’re only two months into this school year, but I’ve really seen an increase on their academic performance as a result of our efforts. (P7)

He was there for a variety of reasons. He came every day; didn’t do a lick of work. It did a lot of, he’s been, I believe, expelled from another school in Fairfield. So he, you know, he had struggled and he was a ninth grader at Matt Garcia. He had struggled previously. And coming in this year, he is, I think the thing that’s interesting is, every day is not perfect, but he has come with really perfect days and other days where parts of the day are perfect. So realizing that it’s going to be this flip for him and probably not for any kid like, that struggles like that, but, but going from zero, to what really feels like sixty miles an hour, in a year, just, it’s really pretty amazing to me. (P8)

Each participant indicated a belief in being privy to a very cool opportunity to not only teach students academics, but to do more than that. They reported being provided a cherished opportunity to participate in an interactive approach at attempting to support significantly at-risk students and to work to empower those students to strive for varying degrees of success. They described that this opportunity to change lives, to impact families and to potentially impact the future lives of students is an ominous responsibility.
when you actually stop to reflect on the changes that might have been initiated by their actions. They discussed that they relished in the wonderment that, even though they might not see the future success unfold for students, they believed they were assisting in laying a new foundation for those successes to flourish. Being able to assist students in developing and expanding on their personal abilities to see themselves from a new perspective is quite a challenge, but working to see the small successes, the academic gains occurring, the maturity taking place within students, and knowing that they have been part of that is a feeling staying with the educators.

I’m trying to, you know, last year kind of trying to figure it all out. And one of the things I came up with is you need to take everything; everything is important. You need to take all, any feedback the kids give you is important feedback, whether it’s positive or negative or anything else, so you have to, you have to take it seriously, but you can’t take it personally. And I think that was part of, of the, you know, kind of learning last year. You know, so like, yeah, I think that it. So, so try to deal with it, but if you try to use the feedback, try to understand where the kids are coming from, but, but realize that there are some things-you can’t fix everything. We’re going to fix everything we can. We can’t fix everything. I can’t take it personally if I can’t fix it, but I can take it seriously and continue to try to fix it. (P8)

The passion, commitment, focus on communication, desire to be consistent, and recognition of the importance to evolve remains high on the consciousness of a number of the participants. Discussing the process of transformation and focus on the future

Participant #8 shared the following:

I think we are going to find people who stay. And I think we’re going to-they’re going to-I think our academics are going to strengthen because the people who are there understand how they can help and work with and make a difference for these kids…But, I think as we find people who, who love working with these kids, and who see it, like you say, as more than a job, it is a mission. And you’re ready to be there for the long haul. When we get that group of teachers there where the-all of the positions are full and they’ve been there for a while. You know, now we’re making, we’re making some great strides in terms of academics. But I think when that happens these kids are just going to blossom and we’re
going to really be able to focus on all the pieces. The academics are going to tighten up. The social and emotional pieces are going to be, you know, the scores will be there and we’re not going to need them as much because we’re going to be better at handling it and dealing with it as things come up. I think the kids are going to feel more support and more-a, a consistent structure as if making a huge difference. (P8)

**Results and Interpretations**

This section of the chapter contains the results of the study, drawn from the findings, along with an interpretive discussion of each result. Based on the obtained data, it is apparent the professional educational staff at MGLC strives to support students in finding success at a number of levels. They seek to build on each student success, act with purpose to engage students, focus on being present for students, hold students accountable for their actions, and consider working at MGLC more than just a job. There is an overwhelming perception identified in the data indicating the staff members, though they have encountered struggles along the way, feel fortunate to be part of such an important educational option for students and believe they are making important strides in changing the lives of students. Four results were identified and are discussed in relation to the relevant literature. These results, in conjunction with the corresponding interpretations and analysis, form the basis for the specific actionable recommendations offered in the following chapter.

**Result 1: The successes that occur at MGLC every day may not be noticeable to many, but nevertheless, the significance of each small success, incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds further opportunities for student transformation.**

The professional education staff of MGLC spoke extensively of the incremental levels of student success they are able to observe on a daily basis. It is these individual student successes that are building the foundational collective importance of the work at
MGLC. Whether the success is a student graduating, gaining more credits toward graduation, completing more class work to gain those credits, or simply attending with an improved percentage of time, each success breeds further opportunities for success.

Further, the data reported by the staff regarding student outcomes indicates the professional education staff, those closest to the day-to-day activities at MGLC, have placed a high regard on their students’ personal transformations, with emphasis toward the positive and increased resiliency for their students.

The staff described the successes of students who might otherwise have left school, ceased to be tracked through attendance data, or to have never accrued another academic credit, yet have continued to come to school and make improvements in a variety of areas due to the existence of MGLC. Linquanti (1992) indicated that when exposed to significant diversity in their lives, students who do not succumb to school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency demonstrate resilience. This researcher believes each positive student example shared by the participants is reflective of another resilient moment. When these moments are captured and woven together they create an actual emotional structural foundation whereby more students can become resilient and teachers are better able to work with additional at-risk students. The projection is that there will be 15 students who will graduate from MGLC during 2013. Each of these graduations represents another testament to the true resiliency occurring at the school.

Bernard (1991) indicated that caring relationships, communication of high expectations and positive beliefs, and opportunities for participation were essential to support student resiliency. At MGLC, there is a real and true emphasis on providing
students with opportunities to develop authentic, caring relationships; on placement of high expectations for both students’ academic gain and emotional development; and on offering a number of opportunities for participation in school life and beyond. The evidence supports that the professional education staff members at MGLC are focusing on developing caring relationships and making positive connections with students, found by Werner and Smith (1992) to be the most essential ingredient required to support resiliency development.

Some might think it melodramatic to believe a school, in its 23rd month of existence, might be providing such an important contribution to individual students, to a local community, and to society in general as well as providing a model that could transform a nation of educators. However, when examining the perceptions of the professional educators at MGLC, the collective stories told and shared unfolded quite differently than would have been expected for many of the MGLC students if they did not have the opportunity to attend the school at all. It could be argued that without the school being part of their personal evolution, or individual transformation, a large number of students might have continued down the negative success trajectories they were headed. Expulsion, continued suspension, increased school absences, continued drug and alcohol abuse, are but a few of the outcomes that could have befallen a number of students without the intervention found at MGLC. Hence, to hear a story of an MGLC student’s success is absolutely relevant, for this success might not have occurred at all if MGLC had not come to be. The student success story may be a simple one, or extensively intensive and involved, but, to hear of any positive changes within the story of a student, such as improved small differences in behavior, improved attendance record,
or academic gains, tells a story different than what might have occurred without the school having the opportunity to intervene in a person’s life.

Interestingly, Chavkin et al. (2000) identified five primary key protective factors thought to support the development of resiliency. The five factors in sum were: supportive relationships, student characteristics, family factors, community factors, and school factors. This research supports the premise that schools, and the people within those schools, can affect positive outcomes for students by planning for and engaging in supportive ways. First and foremost, the MGLC staff strives to provide supportive relationships with both students and their parents. They demonstrate kindness, compassion, and caring, and make significant efforts to connect with all the stakeholders on a personal level. Second, they work on developing students as individual people, with personal development being a primary consideration of their efforts and they work to assist students with gaining a different positive perspective of their changing selves. Third, they take a number of steps to connect with parents and guardians and provide them with the supports they may need themselves to become and stay healthy. Fourth, as a school community, they connect students with sports programs, outside counseling services, medical services, and agencies to support continual personal growth of students. Fifth, they work as a school to collectively support the academic development of students and strive to support the maturity and growth of each child toward adulthood. Hence, it is with a clear degree of evidence that this researcher believes the MGLC staff is promoting student successes at every turn, which is creating a new cycle of success in direct incompatibility with continuance of a potential negative success trajectory for each student.
To further support the continuance of these specific actions and embed them into the system that is MGLC, it may be that there is a need to formalize the accounting of these small, yet important successes. Could it be that tracking each day at MGLC through a formal process, whether it is qualitative or quantitative, may be warranted to be able to recognize and recall the successes occurring? Could it be that a comprehensive system to categorize the level or positive activity occurring each day as a barometer, if you will, of the school’s successes would make these small successes into a tangible, palpable, cluster of positive energy? Success breeds success, and though many levels of success are occurring at MGLC they are not yet being connected to each other. If presented as a whole, with each moment of success woven together, there becomes generated power to build momentum, which in turn will lead to momentous outcomes for a large number of at-risk students.

**Result 2: The professional education staff of MGLC engages in extensive, intentional, purposeful strategies to connect and communicate with students.**

The professional education staff of MGLC spoke extensively and passionately of their positive, purposeful, intentional strategies used to connect, engage, and communicate with students of the school. Whether that connection is found in a brief moment of silence, working with a student on an academic assignment, taking them out for a special excursion to provide a new perspective, or sitting down and talking about life, the professional education staff demonstrates a collective effort to be present for students to support their positive change. Hence, that one common factor in all the interactions is the fact that an adult, who may be mistrusted by a student just for being an adult, has taken the time to be present, be available, be there for what that student needs
at that time. These small acts of being present appear to be providing a type of inoculation to students that is allowing for further trust to develop between them and these caring adults. This trust leads to more connections, thus another positive cycle of behavior is initiated, which is targeted as the new norm.

The staff engages students in deliberate conversations, purposeful positive interactions, and thoughtful perspective-building interactions and seeks to broaden awareness for students of their personal abilities and strengths. The staff indicated they worked extensively to connect with students as individuals and as a collective body. They shared, in detail, a number of situations in which conscious, conscientious acts of engagement, interactivity, connectivity, and participation with students are precipitated with an awareness that it is of ultra-importance to make connections with students first, prior to just trying to teach students academics.

In their definition of resiliency, Castro and Johnson (2008) underscored the importance of healthy supportive relationships and found that individuals indicated they were more connected to their world when they were engaged in positive connections with others. Bernard (1991) indicated the importance of caring relationships as a mode to build supportive development for children noted to be at-risk and found that when children were more supported by these relationships, they were more likely to find resiliency. It is possible that, as a strategy of engagement, each teacher, through their participation in these positive interactions, is building on each other’s success with students. Thus, more and more teacher interactions are positive rather than negative and, in turn, create more opportunities for students to engage in even more positive interactions.
While not all professional educators of MGLC have directly been identified to have engaged in exact or similar types of extensive interactions with students, more positive interactions are currently found than negative ones. These interactions lead to building more positive relationships and assist in quelling negative behaviors of their students, which then builds more opportunities for resilience. Specifically, the data gathered is representational that, at MGLC, the staff holds a perception that the actions they do take are inherently a part of what being at MGLC is about and such actions are required for MGLC students to keep moving forward. Plainly put, they reported they believe the skills and strategies they use at MGLC are unique to the school and student population and that the importance of making connections with students is accomplished with an end-goal in mind; they are not random acts. The level of intentionality of staff behaviors of interacting, communicating, and taking the time to engage with students is what sets them apart from what one might expect to find at a general middle or high school. These purposeful actions are extremely supportive of providing a foundation for both latent resiliency to be ignited and for new sparks of resiliency to ignite.

Taking time to connect on a personal level with students is a time intensive activity. Some participants indicated they worked very hard on a day-to-day basis to connect with students throughout the school day. Other participants stated they went far beyond what was expected, either before or after school, but they believed it to be worth it. They reported spending their own money for activities. They reported spending their own personal time planning and taking students on outings. They indicated they spent their lunch and break times involved in activities supporting building relationships with students. They reported that during their limited time to collaborate with each other, they
spent a great deal of time discussing the status and needs of individual students and developing solutions for these students that then get injected into those students’ futures. The educators at MGLC surely engage in purposeful, intentional, communication strategies to support the growth of students via a number of veins.

Given the importance of making connections with students and the importance of communicating with students, as well as understanding the significant demands that places on the instructors of the program, it would be wise to develop supportive systems allowing for these types of important activities to take place without placing the ownership of the responsibility for the action on the individual teachers. The cost involved, the time drain involved, and the significant responsibility of being present for students may be costs each teacher decides to personally take on; however, at what cost? Potential teacher burnout or relinquishment of personal funds and diminished commitment to the profession could occur. It may be that dedicated funding for activities is needed, time parameters be set well in advance between the teachers and the students, and a more collaborative system for responding to and supporting students would allow for even more successes, rather than leaning on a system that may be unsustainable.

**Result 3: The professional education staff at MGLC is committed to applying consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support students in finding success.**

The findings of this study revealed that the professional education staff at MGLC follows a number of set protocols for inducting students into the school. From the initial conference with the entering student and parents, to the signing of the student and parent compact, to the expected uniform instruction, to the ways in which lessons are provided and the academic work found in the classrooms, the process provides for some significant
parameters of attendance provided to the student and parent upon entrance. The staff
shared that their consistent protocols have morphed and been modified to some degree,
but have remained constant as a process since the inception of the school. Holding onto
these types of consistent processes sets a tone for students and parents upon entrance
indicating it is a “different place” than a regular school and supports the notion that they
have made a commitment to not only the school, but to themselves, to strive for success.

Bernard (1991) discussed the importance for resilient youth to have the
opportunities to minimize risk, to display social competence, and to display pro-social
behaviors. Students welcomed into MGLC are in essence provided an opportunity to do
just that. From the beginning, they are asked to make a commitment to themselves and to
the school, then they are asked to commit on a day-to-day basis to attain the credits they
need to keep moving forward toward graduation. They are asked to wear a uniform, to
come to school each day, to demonstrate respectful behavior, to get along with others, to
complete their work, to be responsible for themselves, to support other students, to keep
moving forward, and to, as much of the pro-MGLC literature quotes, “Reach for the
stars!” In other words, students are asked to minimize the current risk in their lives, take
on responsibility for their own growth, and choose a path of self-growth and importance.

Schusler and Krasney (2010) discussed the importance of creating safe places,
providing structure, building relationships, and having students make meaningful
connections as important outcomes for programs directed at supporting youth
development. The processes described at MGLC to induct students are aligned with
these outcomes and provide for opportunities for students’ clear emotional attachment to
the school. This induction process serves as an initial important step in the attachment of
students to the school and aligns with the unspoken motto, “There’s always another chance.” The process also serves to then provide for the ability for teachers to actually develop the much needed relationships to support learning.

Connecting with families of students, no matter how that family is defined or described is another specific strategy used by the professional educators at MGLC. They call, they text, they e-mail, they wait outside and catch them; they strive to let parents know they are an important part of their students’ lives. Pomrenke (2007) believed a cohesive family unit is better equipped to support a child in being resilient when faced with family conflict. The unfolding argument is that any and all support provided to students facing adversity is a welcome advantage to supporting their internal locus of control to change for the better. Hence, even though it might seem to be stepping beyond the classroom door to connect with parents, this strategy presents as a key component in supporting students in reaching success. Even though a student may doubt the importance of their teacher reaching out to their parent, the outcomes of making a connection are providing a firmer base upon which resiliency may grow.

Recognizing the importance of maintaining and refreshing the culture being grown at MGLC, the professional education staff is in collective need of collaborative time to discuss their evolution, plan for their future, and meet on a continual basis to create, function in a collegial manner, and conscientiously commit to needed changes to meet their ever-changing population of students. Having time to converse, engage in cognitive discourse, advance their collective understanding of human development, and share even the slightest of successes with each other would allow this unique group of educators to recognize, and be recognized for, the important work occurring at their
school. Some argue that when teachers lose their internal locus of control, they tend to begin a slow burn into a negative success trajectory of their own. This researcher would argue to combat that occurrence, ensuring that teachers remain empowered of their own art form, remain focused on the positive impact they are having, and remain engaged in a high level educational community that is forward moving and thinking actually supports the sustainability of resilience for this group of teachers.

**Result 4: Developing, opening, and implementing MGLC to meet the needs of an evolving at-risk student population has been an extremely challenging endeavor, but one well worth the effort.**

Cesarone (1999) wrote, “Resilience is the human capacity and the ability to face, overcome, be strengthened by, and even be transformed by experiences of adversity” (p. 12). This researcher would argue that when an educational institution makes a determined choice to support students with transforming, when they are currently wrapped up in the particular adversity affecting them, it is not a decision taken lightly. In fact, this decision to attempt to support students with life-altering skill development may be one of the most daunting tasks to take on and one far superseding a standard approach to education, namely, “Let’s see how we can improve their test scores.” The reality is not lost on these instructors that if these students were to stop coming to school they might never engage in another measurement to actually assess their personal academic skills. Hence, the primary goal of maintaining students’ attendance at MGLC as students overrides any particular single measure of academic performance.

Princiotta and Reyna (2009) directed four broad goals to the greater educational environment. First, promote high school graduation. Second, target at-risk youth. Third, re-engage youths who have left the system. Fourth, provide rigorous, relevant options to
achieve a high school diploma. However, with no specific guidelines, road map, or set of steps to follow, implementing such broad-based goals have proved to be a challenge for schools, specifically MGLC, to follow when starting up schools with a focus on supporting and transforming the lives of at-risk youths. The MGLC educational staff, through some trial and error, is now finding some momentum with which to carry them forward.

Some of the initial challenges faced were due to the short period of time provided from the inception of the idea for MGLC to the time when the doors opened. There was limited time to select the educational staff, create a collective cohesive collaborative culture among the staff, create and implement a comprehensive curriculum, and develop commitments from the staff upon which to grow. The initial allotment of time was focused on readying the school for opening, identifying a broad spectrum of students who would be welcomed into the school, and on simply providing an option for students, though that option was not fully developed. These challenges were not unexpected; however, as the day-to-day education was to be provided to these particular students, the staff with limited commitment to the school continued to change as teachers returned to previous locations and/or as substitute teachers came and went. Several of the original instructors who remained after the first year indicated that the second year was better, less challenging, and that, as a staff, they were able to begin to gel and create the collegiality needed to actually become a group of focused educators.

Another challenge faced by the staff was focused on the broad spectrum of students originally welcomed into the school. Acquiring students from second through 12th grade from all schools within the District meant that for a small school with no more
than 100 students, they were teaching at least at 11 different grade levels. The students’ needs were wide and varied and, given the significant differences between the students, some were as young as seven with others older than 18, which created some serious challenges for the staff with directing students, keeping them apart, and securing the safety of the smaller children. It also created a disparity among the staff with regard to the prioritization of student needs. As the third year of MGLC began, the second-through fifth-grade program was relocated to another school site, which has provided the remaining sixth- through 12th-grade instructors with a new opportunity to find compatible practices, which has increased collaboration.

It is absolutely interesting to note that even though no specific curriculum has been vetted and implemented, even though no set structural time has been dedicated to providing lessons about life and consequences of choices, and even though no collective staff development has been provided to all the educators regarding how they should communicate the MGLC way of behaving, each participant shared a belief that overall students are “getting better,” “much improved,” or “really trying.” Escarti (2010) and Walsh et al. (2010) both studied the effects of using Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model programs, respectively, to support transformational change in two distinct populations. Though Escarti found no quantifiable differences between a control and study group on measures of resiliency, differences in qualitative analysis found that students themselves attributed positive differences in themselves to their participation in the program. Walsh et al. focused on the transference of skills acquired to other environments and found that both students and the adults in their lives
reported examples of transference of more appropriate behavior to other parts of their lives away from school.

Though the professional educators at MGLC have confirmed their perceptions are that positive changes are occurring for students at the school, it is believed they would benefit from being provided a collective set of skills that would benefit the entire school population. Further, the students of the school would benefit from receiving a consistent curriculum presented in a consistent manner focused on developing their personal and social responsibilities. Though the staff reported that moments of success are occurring, and they believe there is a positive impact on students based on all of the interactions, connections, and communications they have with students, to specifically increase resiliency levels, develop responsibility in students, and allow for positive relationship-building skills to flourish, a more comprehensive approach and program appears warranted.

Summary

Chapter 4 contains a significant amount of essential data providing the reader with a rich, thick description of the collective perceptions and many of the lived experiences of the professional education staff at MGLC. The triangulation of the interview data, observational data, and artifact review led to the findings of the study, comprised of the six major themes that emerged from the field research:

1) Passionate Belief in the Power of People,

2) Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference,

3) A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders,
4) Communication is an Essential Element,

5) Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone, and

6) It’s a Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes.

In addition to the presented findings, four results of the study were identified, discussed, and analyzed, providing an examination of the major patterns and trends that emerged from the research as well as several potential suggestions for supportive enhancements to the school. The four results included:

1) The successes that occur at MGLC every day may not be noticeable to many. However, the significance of each small success, incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds further opportunities for student transformation;

2) The professional education staff of MGLC engages in extensive, intentional, purposeful strategies to connect and communicate with students;

3) The professional education staff at MGLC is committed to applying consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support students in finding success; and

4) Developing, opening, and implementing MGLC to meet the needs of an evolving at-risk student population, has been an extremely challenging endeavor, but one well worth the effort.

Each of these results of the study was discussed, with additional context provided for each result in the form of interpretation rooted in the findings and relevant literature. The analysis, contemplations, and interpretations form the basis for the Recommendations section in the following chapter.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the professional education staff of Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC) as they concluded their 23\textsuperscript{rd} month of existence and embarked on their third year of implementation. Through a comprehensive and careful analysis of the data obtained from semi-structured interviews, observational notes, and artifact review, this researcher sought to understand the perspectives of the professional education staff toward the strategies they utilized to support students in increasing resiliency, developing responsibility, and in building their ability to build relationships with others. By taking time to read, re-read, and read again, in addition to reviewing all the obtained data, this researcher believes he was able to explore and identify a number of the unique experiences and perspectives of the staff. In addition, by comprehensively analyzing and interpreting the data, he developed a broad collective appreciation for what is being accomplished at MGLC by the staff. By allowing the data to speak, this researcher was able to identify unique findings and themes that provided for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, educating students at MGLC.

This study led to six findings from participants’ responses, interpreted in relation to relevant literature, and analyzed for potential suggestions for enhancing the learning environment for students at MGLC. These findings centered on themes found within the research assisting the reader with understanding the collective perspectives of the participants:
1) Passionate Belief in the Power of People,

2) Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships
   Makes a Difference,

3) A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders,

4) Communication is an Essential Element,

5) Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone, and

6) It’s a Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes.

The results of the study were drawn from further analyzing the identified themes in conjunction with the relevant literature completed for this study. The four results were discussed with interpretive analysis leading to a number of plausible suggestions for improving the educational opportunities for students at MGLC. The four results were:

1) The successes that occur at MGLC every day may not be noticeable to many. However, the significance of each small success, incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds further opportunities for student transformation;

2) The professional education staff of MGLC engages in extensive, intentional, purposeful strategies to connect and communicate with students;

3) The professional education staff at MGLC is committed to applying consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support students in finding success; and

4) Developing, opening, and implementing MGLC to meet the needs of an evolving at-risk student population, has been an extremely challenging endeavor, but one well worth the effort.
Conclusions of this study took into consideration the findings, themes derived from these findings, interpretations and analytical synthesis of all of the data, results of the study, and suggestions brought forth from connecting results to the relevant literature conducted for this study. Following is a discussion of the conclusions of this study with respect to the specific research questions of the study. Following the discussion are a number of recommendations specifically made with the intent of enhancing the educational opportunities for the marginalized students of MGLC, recommendations for the broader educational community when considering embarking on a similar venture of creating a school akin to MGLC, and recommendations for future research. This chapter concludes with a final, personal reflection on the issues of resiliency, responsibility, and relationship building.

**Conclusions**

Understanding the perceptions of the MGLC professional educators in their efforts and strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships were the primary foci of this study. Hence, the research questions were designed to elicit responses that could be collectively integrated to develop an ontological understanding of the group experiences of these educators to then be able to construct the premise of what it actually means to teach at MGLC. Conclusions for this study are based on providing specific answers to the three primary research questions with the hopes that by understanding these answers, current educators and future education researchers will be better positioned to conduct additional research to broaden the understanding of the development of such schools and their impact on society as a whole. Further, the
conclusions seek to assist the professional educators at MGLC with a pragmatic approach to potential change to further support students as they strive for success. The three research questions and their accompanying answers follow.

**Research Question 1: How do the professional educators of MGLC describe strategies they use to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building?**

The professional educators at MGLC display intentional and purposeful actions with clear communicative focus attached to actionable behaviors with specific and targeted goals of initiating success for students. The professional educators of MGLC were extremely thoughtful and conscientious when describing the strategies they used to support the advancement of resiliency skills in students. They expressed a high level of accountability and expectation when discussing how they promoted the characteristic of personal responsibility in students and they were often drawn to emotion when describing the layers of personal connection they have gone through, and continue to go through, to reach students. As expressed in the results of the study, the professional educators shared they engaged in extensive, intentional, purposeful communication with students and applied and used consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support student success. More to the point, they strove to connect on a personal level with each student, sought to expand supports within and outside their families to support students, and were conscientious in their interactions with students to ensure each step taken along the way secured another opportunity for success for each student. A conclusion that may be drawn from this is that to support a student’s ability to become more resilient, demonstrate more personal responsibility, and to be able to develop positive interpersonal relationship skills, educators should seek to
act in a powerful, positive, and purposeful manner, should strive to connect with students wherever they are, and should act in a deliberate fashion to demonstrate belief that the best is yet to come for each student.

Research Question 2: What perceptions do the professional educators of MGLC have of the effectiveness of these approaches?

The significance of recognizing each small success, incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds opportunities for student transformation and is described as an important characteristic of the MGLC. The professional educators at MGLC shared through the detailed interviews that they believed they were finding individual and collective successes with students. As discussed in the results section, successes, no matter how small or large, are important to recognize and reflect on and usually occur due to the powerful passionate belief of a person supporting a student. Each one of the participants indicated having personally connected with students and having gone beyond the standard limits of what is required for him or her to accomplish the job during tenure at MGLC. They reported they have done these things not for the money but out of respect for the role they are playing in the education of these students, not just in providing education to these students. In general, the professional educators reflected the importance of teaching these students to first be people. In general, the professional educators reflected the importance of teaching these students to first be people – people with perspective, understanding, care for self, goals, desire for success, connections to something greater than themselves, a belief shared with others, and that by staying in school and continuing to build their personal skills, they can empower themselves to have a better life.
Collectively, the professional education staff spoke of moments of success for students and themselves that might be lost or unaccounted for in other settings but at MGLC can be used to propel additional moments of success, to build momentum. Moreover, they spoke of the current momentum being gained after going through a number of logistical changes: new location, removing second through fifth graders from the campus, and better consistency of the faculty with a stronger, deliberate, commitment to staying at the school. Thus, it is recognizing that each of the moments of success are building upon each other and gaining momentum, which in turn is providing a growing light of hope that what they all set out to accomplish as educators is coming to fruition, a place for students to grow and improve each day. As the success continues to be a catalyst for more success, they are hopeful they will be recognized with momentous acclimation that they are accomplishing what they set out to do: provide for each student what they need in order to assist them with taking their next step. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that educators, when working together with collective force, with passionate belief, with deliberate acts, with the right resources, and with positive intent, can not only create positive experiences for students and themselves, but can actually transform destinies for students, their families, and society at large.

Research Question 3: How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the lessons learned about these approaches, and how might those lessons inform future strategies to assist students at MGLC?

Creating MGLC has been a process that, though challenging, has been well worth the effort given the successes being realized by students and the evolution of the staff as a unified collegial unit. The professional education staff’s responses were extremely contemplative when addressing the lessons learned. They described the
challenges they have faced as individuals and collectively. They discussed how their experiences have guided them through their journey and projected the continuing development of MGLC. Though focused on the positives of each student’s personal growth, the participants shared that the journey thus far has not always gone smoothly. As described in detail in Chapter 4, the participants indicated that the first year of instruction at the school was difficult and frustrating. They cited feeling as though they did not have a clear direction as a group of educators, did not have a collectively agreed upon designed culture fully supported by the then current staff, and did not have enough collaboration time to work on their issues and concerns. They stated frustration with having too broad of a student population, which created logistical challenges limiting their overall perceptions of success. They spoke at length about the difficulty with teacher turnover, use of substitutes to fill positions, and to some degree the difficulties with needing to have multiple credentials to teach at the school.

The staff then discussed that during the second year, their first full year of service to students, things got somewhat better with respect to their accountable successes and budding cohesion. There continued to be some coming and going of staff, and they continued to struggle to find an identity as a school, but they began to find their footing, began to be able to focus more on teaching students, and began to rely more on each other as a collegial unit.

It is important to note that as they have entered their third year of service to students, MGLC has been relocated to a smaller facility more suited to the current design goals. Additionally, a decision was made to relocate the younger students, grades two through five, to another facility off the main campus. Further, more staff than in the
previous two years has returned to the school with a more focused approach to providing wrap-around-services to all students. That being said, the current members of the school reflected they believed this to be the best start they have experienced, that the students are more connected to the school and each other, and that they are beginning to find their groove as a collective body of educators. They made an important point that their ability in building cohesion as a staff is not lost on the students. The tone in their responses about the future of MGLC was upbeat, positive, and brimming with enthusiasm for the next set of initiatives and successes yet to come. The researcher concluded that new educational ideas, innovations, and reforms generally take time to mature and develop. Further, when working with an ever-evolving, at-risk student population, a complete set of ideas may never fully become set in cement, yet may still lead to significant effectiveness for students and their families. Adaptation, flexibility, and allowing room for programs such as MGLC to organically grow and develop may be one way in which to support sustainable success.

**Recommendations**

Based upon the findings, results, and conclusions of this study, this researcher offers the following recommendations targeted in three veins. First, direct recommendations are made that seek to support enhancing the educational opportunities for the previously marginalized at-risk students currently attending MGLC, or who may attend MGLC in the future. Second, this researcher offers recommendations to the broader educational community who may be considering embarking on a similar journey for creating a school with similarities to MGLC. Third, recommendations for further research are provided that may allow an increased understanding of the students attending
MGLC; to identify potential quantitative differences occurring for this group of students; and to provide deeper understanding of issues of resiliency development, responsibility development, and interpersonal relationship-building skills as essential elements to student success in and out of school.

**Recommendations for Matt Garcia Learning Center Professional Educators**

The recommendations made here are specific to the MGLC professional educators, with specific focus on providing enhanced educational opportunities for students of MGLC. While other educational institutions may benefit from these or similar recommendations, it should be noted that transferability of these recommendations may not be suitable as they have been developed with the specific site, population, and place in time in mind. It is recommended the professional education staff of MGLC be provided the following to support them in their quest to meet the needs of their students.

1. The professional education staff of MGLC should be provided with a comprehensive delivery of staff development to support the following areas:
   a. Resiliency Development
   b. Responsibility Development
   c. Relationship-building Skills Development
   d. Communication and Active Listening Skills.
   e. Diversity and Cultural Awareness.
   f. Positive Behavior Intervention Skills.
   g. Crisis Prevention Intervention Training Skills.
h. Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Program (Escarti, 2010; Walsh et al., 2010).

2. Collaboration Time: The professional education staff should be provided dedicated and essential time to collaborate on the development and alignment of academic and social development curriculum for all their students. During this collaboration time, they could further focus on the socio-emotional development of students and plan and organize opportunities to reflect and recognize successes of their students, staff, and entire school community. They should be afforded time to plan for future opportunities for students to interact and positively engage with each other, and they should be allowed to create a comprehensive school system to ensure time for continuous communication at all levels. Further, during the collaborative time they should invest in developing a system to track, account for, and recognize the positive transformations and successes occurring each day for each student.

3. Matt Garcia, the namesake of the MGLC, made a difference. As such, MGLC should utilize his legacy in a more forthright manner by teaching students about Matt’s perseverance toward his goals, aspirations, and process for reaching the achievements he did. MGLC should seek to support students in understanding the actionable strategies Matt Garcia used to excel in his short life and seek to support their students in emulating the best Matt Garcia himself had to offer. This approach would support the premise that each day, each student, makes hundreds of choices that will either propel them into successful situations or derail them from it and supports the idea that students,
when provided the right resources, support, and nurturing can empower themselves by making the right choices. For example, in all artifact documents produced for MGLC, from the students’ initial contract form to their graduation certificate, the following question was included on the document to support a student’s personal ability to reflect and build perspective: Did I do what I needed today to make a difference, support my transformation, and reach for the stars?

4. MGLC should investigate and consider implementing Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model program, as discussed by Escarti (2010), and respectively by Walsh et al. (2010), as part of the standard curriculum for all students. Though there are vast examples of life teachings occurring at the school, having a consistent model implemented in a consistent manner across the school to all students, in all classrooms, would provide a unifying strategy that could further support both students and educators as they focused on student development.

5. Specific and targeted funding should be allotted for teachers to engage in pro-social activities with students both during and outside the school day. These funds could come in the way of dedicated funding from the school itself, the district, or through donations from the community to support the needs at MGLC. To sustain the positive activities and connections between students and staff, and or between students themselves, dedicated funding must be available to support these activities for the activities to be sustainable for the staff.
6. Expansion of Parent Connections: The professional educators at MGLC place a significant emphasis on making connections with parents, an admirable goal. To further enhance these attempted connections with parents and to further support parents in acquiring skills needed to support their children, implementing a continuous parent education program and or parent development program held at the school site might prove helpful.

7. Peer Mediation: In response to identified difficulties between students, providing for training in the area of peer mediation is recommended for all students. By seeking to empower students with skills to solve problems with each other, they in turn would be provided another asset by which to grow their skills.

**Recommendations for the Broader Educational Community**

The need for the broader educational community to initiate, develop, and implement schools similar to MGLC is upon us. Given the continuing difficulties students have with fitting in at many of our current comprehensive schools, continuation schools, and court schools, alternative, specialized schools of choice may be the next wave to come forward as a new reform movement to support both at-risk students and students in general. Simply starting new “continuation” schools with the same old parameters will not continually engage students in developing as people, let alone students. This research study found that the professional educators of MGLC endured some frustrating times as they initially came to the school, which might have been lessened if several areas of consideration were undertaken prior to opening the doors. It is with this in mind that the following recommendations are made.
1. Secure more than four months for the design and development of a new school of choice before opening the doors.

2. Entice and engage professional, empowered, dedicated individuals to the school who are then provided time to work together during the planning phase to collectively build and share in the commitment of the vision, mission, and culture of the school.

3. Identify a specific population of students to be served and remain focused on the selected targeted population that will be served.

4. Strive to secure outside support agencies to provide wrap-around-services to the students and their families.

5. Provide dedicated collaboration time for both the classified and certificated staff of the new school.

6. Secure two-year commitments from the hired certificated staff, if possible.

7. Understand that given the unique personnel, the individual students who will attend, and the multitude of family structures that accompany each student, the school will take on a life of its own to support each sub-structure of the school.

8. Ensure that funding for smaller class sizes is authorized and secured over several years to ensure adequacy of support for idea fruition.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The researcher recommends further research to provide additional information and depth to the findings of this study regarding the perceptions of the professional educators at MGLC. Further research may expand on the current findings, results, and
conclusions and may provide the broader educational community more insight into the intricate variances in relationships and perspectives held between teachers and students. With this in mind, the following areas of research are recommended to broaden the knowledge base of educators.

1. A study focusing on the phenomenological perceptions and understandings of the students attending MGLC would assist educators in determining if students’ perceptions run parallel to their instructors or are significantly different with respect to lived experiences.

2. A study measuring the personal characteristics of resiliency, responsibility, and relationship-building skills for the current group of students attending the school might help quantify whether the perceptions of the professional educators are in tune with the student beliefs.

3. A study to identify potential quantitative differences occurring for this group of students attending MGLC and the District’s other “alternative” schools would provide insight into the potential postulated outcomes for the students at MGLC.

4. A case sample study telling the story of a single or several students as they journey through MGLC on their way toward what life brings to them would provide deeper understanding of resiliency development issues, responsibility development, and interpersonal relationship-building skills for an individual student.
Summary

This study revealed that with respect to educating students at MGLC, the perceptions of the professional education staff are multi-faceted, heartfelt, and impactful for the greater educational community. The complexity in their responses is reflective of the fact that they care deeply as individuals and as a collective body of educators. The descriptions of their experiences indicate that, as a staff, they are gaining awareness that as students overcome personal challenges, as they endure and combat adversity, and as they find success, albeit, at times in limited fashion, they are more ready to face new challenges that lie ahead.

At the school, a belief in the passionate power of people to change how things are and to make them better exists. There are actionable behaviors taking into consideration the importance of making connections with students at multiple levels. There is recognition that to provide the best opportunities for all students to grow, a huge level of commitment and consistency is required of all individuals who work with at-risk students. There is an understanding the importance communicating with students makes. There is a strong dedication to connecting with students to demonstrate to them that they, as individual staff members and as a collective body, believe in them. The professional education staff at MGLC is making a significant impact on stemming the tide of dropping out for a significant portion of students. To accomplish this they are using the strategies of discourse, sharing emotions, being present for students, providing feedback to students, and primarily helping students recognize the positive influences they can be to themselves. They are striving as a group to make sure students have the information they need to make their next decision and not become stymied by their set of circumstances.
As I conclude this work, and as I have contemplated my personal growth and development throughout this research study, I recalled a simple saying my father used to say to me, which actually made him chuckle hysterically when he did, “El loro en el horno.” Translated into English, it means, “Parrot in the oven.” The saying, as described to me by my father, was based on a Mexican folktale describing a parrot so desirous to be cooled down from the hot sun that he was fooled into the shade of an oven by a deceptive cat. The lesson as explained to me by my father was to be cautious of your surroundings, because at first what is offered to you may appear to be just what you are looking for, to only find out that what you thought was comforting was simply a ruse to turn you into lunch. By coincidence, years later, the title of a book caught my eye, Parrot in the Oven, Mi Vida, written by Victor Martinez (1996), which shares a similar understanding of the phrase by the author. For me, as I think about all of the intentional, purposeful, positive acts occurring at MGLC to assist marginalized, at-risk, struggling, yet developing students with gaining knowledge, making better choices, becoming people who are self-empowered on the road to self-actualization, I believe the MGLC staff is making a dramatic impact to keep students abreast of their surroundings, to see choices they never knew existed, and keep them out of the oven.
List of References


Appendix A: Consent

I am a Doctoral Candidate at Drexel University. The title of my dissertation is: A Phenomenological Perspective of Educating Students at The Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC): Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development, and Relationship Building Development Skills.

This interview will be recorded. During the interview, you will be asked to answer some questions regarding your perspectives of the strategies used to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building. This interview was designed to be approximately twenty to thirty minutes in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you feel you cannot answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, feel free to indicate this and I will move on to the next question.

All information from this interview is to be used solely for the purposes of this dissertation thesis. All the information gathered will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office. Only my supervising professor and I will have access to this information. This interview is designed to obtain life experiences that will be reviewed in conjunction with other pieces of data in order to develop a comprehensive description of what it means to provide education at the MGLC. None of the data will be used to identify any one participant or student of the school. Upon completion of this project, data will be maintained in my home office in a locked file cabinet.
Participant’s Agreement:

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation. I understand the intent and purpose of this research.

I am aware the data will be used for research as part of a dissertation thesis and that none of the obtained data will be personally identifiable. I have the right to review, comment on, and/or withdraw information prior to the paper’s publication. The data gathered in this study are confidential and anonymous with respect to my personal identity unless I specify/indicate otherwise. I grant permission for the use of this information for a:

_____ dissertation thesis
_____ presentation

I grant permission to use one of the following:

_____ My first name only
_____ My full name
_____ Just a pseudonym

Upon request I will be given a copy of the:

_____ paper, _____ audiotape, _____ videotape, _____ transcribed interview, _____ photograph(s)

Additional conditions for my participation in this research are noted here:

I have read the above form, and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time, and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today’s interview.

Participant’s Signature

____________________________________

Interviewer’s Signature
Appendix B: Letter of Permission

Matt Garcia Learning Center
230 Atlantic Avenue, Fairfield, CA 94533 (707) 421-4200
Roxanne Rice, Principal

To whom It May Concern,

Robert A. Martinez, Director of Human Resources for the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District is hereby provided approval to conduct his Doctoral Dissertation research on the campus of the Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC).

Mr. Martinez has been a strong advocate for this public school of choice, and has thoroughly explained his proposed phenomenological study to my satisfaction. It is anticipated that he will work exclusively with the professional education staff at MGLC in obtaining data for his research study through semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. I believe that my educational staff will participate in earnest, and will benefit from having the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of educating at MGLC.

If I can be of any further assistance please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Roxanne Rice
Principal, Matt Garcia Learning Center

"Our Mission is to Provide a Quality Educational System that Assures Opportunities for Every Student to Learn and Meet the Challenges of the Future"
Appendix C: Interview Questions

These questions are to be used for both semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

**Setting the context for the interview:**
Say: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in this one-on-one recorded interview to assist me with completing my doctoral dissertation through Drexel University.”
“Prior to initiating the recording we have discussed the parameters for the interview, so we will now proceed to the interview.”

Questions:
1. Please share with me a little about yourself including: Your name, your experience as an educator, and your association with MGLC.

2. How long have you been associated with MGLC?

3. Please share with me any other types of roles you served at MGLC?

4. Please describe some of the strategies that are used by the MGLC professional education staff to teach students to become resilient.

5. Please describe some of the strategies that are used by the MGLC professional education staff to build personal responsibility for students.

6. Please share with me some of the strategies that are used by the MGLC professional education staff to engage in positive interpersonal relationship building?

7. Please share with me your perceptions of how effective the above mentioned strategies have been to support the development of students:
   a. Resiliency
   b. Responsibility
   c. Relationship-building
8. Please share with me some of the challenges that you have experienced during your tenure with MGLC, and if applicable, how those challenges have modified your expectations of the school.

9. People often talk about helping students build resiliency, develop responsibility, and to build relationships as needed skills to succeed in school. How do you feel about this statement?

10. Upon reflection of your time at MGLC, what are some of the “lessons learned” that have stayed with you as you ready yourself for a new school year?

11. Upon more reflection of those lessons, how do you think they can inform future strategies that might be implemented to further support students in the academic journeys?

12. Think about a student that has really made progress, now tell me about their journey thus far at the Matt Garcia Learning Center.
Appendix D: Artifacts

Summary notes from examined artifacts

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<tr>
<th>Archival Data Documents</th>
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<td>Document:</td>
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<td>A-1: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Timeline</td>
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<td>A-2: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Brochure</td>
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<td>A-3: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Update</td>
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<td>A-4: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Fundraiser Flier-Concert</td>
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<td>A-5: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Dedication Ceremony Pamphlet</td>
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<td>A-6: Matt Garcia Learning Center: Online Documents</td>
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<td>1. Vision/Mission</td>
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<td>2. Staff</td>
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<td>3. Staff Photos</td>
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<td>4. Staff Photos-support</td>
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<td>5. Expanded Vision</td>
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<td>6. Learning Resources</td>
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<td>These documents provide information obtained from the Matt Garcia Learning Center website.</td>
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<td>A-7: Student Support for At-Risk Students</td>
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<td>A-8: Matt Garcia Learning Center Expulsion Flow Chart</td>
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<td>A-9: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Student Referral Form</td>
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<td>A-10: Matt Garcia Learning Center Acceptance Letter</td>
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<td>A-11: Matt Garcia Learning Center-Student and Parent Contract</td>
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<td>A-12: Presentation Flier-“Parent, Teacher, Students &amp; Leadership”</td>
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<td>A-13: Project Support Referral Packet</td>
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<td>A-18: Matt Garcia Learning Center: Digital Video Recording-overview of school</td>
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