

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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By

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ABSTRACT

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Student success can be assessed in various ways in determining what best supports their needs within the educational setting. By further examining their individual perceptions and experiences, they can be better equipped with the right resources to address specific needs and challenges. Research indicates that multiple elements of a student's educational experience contribute to their academic success such as motivation (Thorsen et al., 2021), conscientious personality (Poropat, 2009), self-regulation (Annalakshmi, 2019), and work habits (Simpkins et al., 2020). This qualitative study explores the role of student perceptions of academic success in middle school students. Using semi-structured interviews, data were collected from 9 students at The Catamount School (TCS), in Cullowhee NC. Thematic analysis revealed four primary themes: (1) Kids Helping Kids, (2) Coping Rooms, (3) Teacher Modeling, and (4) Help with Learning. The findings of this study seem to reflect that all four themes appear to be related to academic success through the practice of empathy, self-regulation, building trust, and interpersonal connections between peers and teachers. A student at TCS is safe with teachers and students, feels that they are in a place where they can make mistakes and be given an opportunity to set things right. Students at

TCS are thriving on the variety of resources provided to them and within a well-rounded and supportive community.

INTRODUCTION

One of the primary goals for schools is to ensure that all students can be academically successful. In order for this to occur, it is important to understand academic success. Students who experience academic success are described as using certain skills to create and accomplish a set of goals that impacts their educational outcomes (Poropat, 2009). Multiple elements of a student's educational experience contribute to their academic success such as motivation (Thorsen et al., 2021), conscientious personality (Poropat, 2009), self-regulation (Annalakshmi, 2019), and work habits (Simpkins et al., 2020). In addition, how academic success is measured can vary including grades, grade point average (GPA), program completion, graduate employment, and student satisfaction (Crowther & Briant, 2021).

Four different aspects of academic success will be considered in this research. This includes the areas of resilience, social and emotional learning (SEL), student engagement, and school climate. In this study, we will be targeting academic success and identifying what middle school students perceive as being most important in their own academic success.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Resiliency

Prince-Embury (2011) defines resilience as “the complex interaction of child characteristics and external supports that buffer the effects of adverse situations that place children at risk for negative outcomes” (p. 672). Research conducted by Steca et al. (2007), states that resilient children tend to be more intellectual, self-confident, successful at school, unlikely to be delinquents, and relatively free of psychopathology. Even though adverse experiences can lead to detrimental impacts on a child’s future, they can also be an opportunity to enhance internal self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-esteem, problem solving skills, secure attachment, attributions, engagement and connections with others in one’s life (Annalakshmi, 2019).

These positive elements of a resilient student are the basis of the Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents (RSCA), developed by Prince-Embury (2011). This model assesses the three core developmental factors of personal resiliency: sense of mastery, sense of relatedness, and emotional reactivity.

Children who develop a sense of mastery, sometimes referred to as self-efficacy, solve problems by looking at opportunities using a cause and effect approach. Students who feel that they have the ability to complete various tasks are more likely to approach challenges at hand (Steca et al., 2007). This is because they are more motivated to do well and require less hesitation in responding to difficult situations right away. Henceforth, this skill allows one to

practice problem solving approaches to tasks which then leads to a sense of mastery in their abilities to succeed academically.

The next factor within the RCSA model is sense of relatedness. Children who can develop connections with others through a sense of trust have an easier time in building relationships outside of their family such as with their teachers or other community members. Evidence supports personal resiliency being influenced greatly by individuals having the capability to develop strong supportive relationships early on which produces skills that potentially lead to successful outcomes including academic success. The number of relationships that they have is seen as less important (Gibson & Clarbour, 2017).

The last factor that is important in the development of personal resiliency is the emotional reactivity of an individual. This consists of an individual having an automatic and vulnerable response due to an adverse event or circumstance (Prince-Embury, 2011). Those who have practiced regulating their emotions in response to previous stressful experiences automatically obtain strengths related to their emotional responses in different types of scenarios (Gibson & Clarbour, 2017). Personal resiliency is an important multidimensional construct that is reliant on a person's ability to possess resources in handling adversity while recovering emotionally, socially, and physiologically from stress and trauma (Deblinger et al., 2017). Research has shown that resiliency can motivate student success (Thorsen et al., 2021). Specifically, an individual who has been through some type of adverse experience can learn to handle new situations leading to academic resiliency and success. This can be achieved through academic goal setting, managing emotions that interfere with peers and other social activities, and obtaining awareness on self-efficacy. Students who are more resilient have a greater opportunity for becoming successful in educational outcomes (Thorsen et al., 2021).

Resiliency contributes significantly to academic achievement especially in adolescent populations (Prince-Embury, 2011; Annalakshmi, 2019; Thorsen et al., 2021). The developmental transition from middle school to high school is an example of a stressful event that occurs for adolescents who attend school in a public setting (Sanders et al., 2020). This is normally a significant period of transition with new relationships being developed and the body's hormones significantly affecting their emotions. In the academic setting, adolescents may encounter obstacles that shape the way they handle situations and react to academic problems (Thorsen et al., 2021). Identifying components that make up academic resiliency might further the research on ways children and especially adolescents can be more successful in school.

Social and Emotional Learning

Without the proper development in emotional regulation, a child's academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate school success can be hindered (Durlak et al., 2011). It is important for individuals to learn how to control and adapt to different situations effectively, which can be done through the practice of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). This is defined by Greenberg et al. (2017), as "the ability to integrate thinking, emotion, and behavior to deal effectively with personal and social challenges (pg. 14). Crawford (2022) defines SEL as "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (pg. 28)." The Collaborative Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2023) framework identifies five competencies that make up SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023).

Individuals who hold strengths within each of these competencies automatically enhance their ability to become more academically successful. The development of SEL skills at an early age can effectively promote a child's academic success and life outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). As children grow developmentally and intellectually, they require these sets of skills to help cope with difficult situations and automatic emotions. This is especially important in the transition from middle school to high school. (Crawford, 2022). Adolescents need to learn how to use the right words and coping strategies when in stressful situations and build positive relationships by improving their empathy skills and prosocial behaviors. This results in a decrease in emotional distress and internalizing problems and an increase in rates of positive emotions and behaviors (Morrish et al., 2018). For highschoolers, it can be quite difficult to manage their behaviors without proper training in doing so. It has been found that thirty percent of high school students engage in multiple high-risk behaviors such as violence, substance use, depression and other related outcomes that interfere with their school performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Student Engagement

Ghasemi (2023) defines student engagement, also referred to as academic engagement, as a “student’s active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, and commitment to educational goals and learning” (p.42). An engaged student demonstrates attentive behaviors, participates frequently in class discussions, exerts effort in their class activities, and exhibits interest in learning (Abubakar et al., 2022). Students, who spend time wanting to learn and are actively engaged in educational activities, have a higher chance of becoming successful individuals' long term (Molinari & Grazia, 2023).

Three types of student engagement have been identified including behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement (Trowler et al., 2022). Behavioral

engagement looks specifically at the participation or ‘what the student does’ in their learning environment. This is described as a student who shows up to class, participates in academic activities, tasks and homework (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023). In contrast, those who show a lack of interest usually display signs of passiveness, forsaking, distraction, or being mentally disconnected and unprepared. Cognitive engagement looks at ‘what the student thinks’ and this is described as the student meeting or exceeding assignment requirements (Trowler et al., 2022). Students who are cognitively engaged produce more sophisticated strategies such as self-regulation or metacognition (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023). Metacognitive actions in students lead to self-regulated learning which enables them to structure how they plan, regulate, and monitor their knowledge. Those who do not practice this type of engagement may have a more difficult time with problem solving and regulating and controlling their learning habits. Lastly, emotional engagement is seen as ‘what the student feels’ and is described as their interest and enthusiasm within a learning environment (Trowler et al., 2022). If the curriculum is linked to students’ interests, experiences, and ‘future selves’, they will engage emotionally in school. When students show a lack of interest in school, they display negative emotional states such as boredom, frustration, depression, anxiety, and sometimes rage (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023).

A study by Ghasemi (2023) demonstrated that motivation was correlated with all three forms of student engagement. Motivation is an important factor related to student success. Students who have more motivation to do well in school tend to be more engaged in their classes which results in higher academic achievement (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023). Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) shares that “motivated students are more inclined to show skills such as self-efficacy and intrinsic worth, and report metacognitive skills such as critical thinking and self-regulation, which influences their academic performance” (p.9).

School Climate

It is important for schools to create a safe and trusting environment for their students to learn and prosper throughout their education. Researchers define school climate in different ways. Zhou et al. (2023) describes school climate as the norms, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures that students experience. Cohen et al. (2009) simplifies this definition by stating that school climate is simply the quality and character that a school presents. Findings support that school climate is important in the effective cognitive, social, and psychological development of students (Kurt, 2022).

Schneider & Duran (2010) identified four climate constructs including safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. These constructs contribute to a physically, socially, and emotionally safe environment for students. Davis & Warner (2015) expanded on these four constructs adding in the school norms, values, behaviors, goals, and organizational structures and policies as being reflected in the climate of a school.

Schools that monitor and address nonacademic factors such as school climate provide information needed to implement innovative strategies in reducing learning disparities among students (Daily et al., 2019). For example, one approach used is the implementation of SEL programs. Evidence based programs on SEL are proven to be an indicator in increased test scores and a major impact toward other educational factors such as the school climate (Thapa et al., 2013).

Previous research has shown that there is a direct relationship between school climate and academic achievement (Davis & Warner, 2015). One important aspect of school climate related to academic success is student connectedness. Thapa et al. (2013) reported that school size is

negatively correlated with student connectedness. Smaller school communities were found to support student success and academic outcomes. It was also found that higher student perceptions of school safety were associated with higher standardized test scores.

Lastly, school climate has been shown to be connected to student engagement, both of which have a positive impact on academic success in students. Students who are more engaged within their school setting (e.g. classrooms, within the hallway, curricular activities etc.), are more likely to report experiencing a sense of belonging, having respectful peer relationships, and describing a positive perception of their school atmosphere (Molinari & Grazia, 2023). A positive and supportive school climate that focuses on student perceptions of safety within their school, high level of encouragement and challenges, and the motivation to succeed creates an atmosphere for growth in student development and better performance in school (Kwong & Davis, 2015).

The Catamount School

The Catamount School (TCS) is a community school that promotes excellence in students who have academic difficulties that may hinder their learning. The school aims to recognize diversity in learning and the additional support that many students need in order to achieve their goals and do well academically. The school identifies opportunities that will enhance every student's ability to be successful. The approaches that they use include building resiliency, developing social emotional skills, encouraging academic engagement, and providing a positive school climate.

In the area of school climate, TCS strives to provide a caring, collaborating, and socially just environment for their students. TCS utilizes the “whole school, whole community, whole

child” model in providing each student with a unique opportunity to succeed in an academic setting. The school is composed of smaller classroom sizes to provide a more engaging environment for students to learn and thrive.

In the area of resiliency, most if not all students at TCS have been exposed to some type of adverse experience. The educational team at TCS assists in creating interventions best suited for students’ needs. Through the collaboration of school personnel, each child is seen as being more successful academically. Each area of the school’s curriculum emphasizes a problem centered approach, including project-based learning and development of critical reasoning abilities that promote a more meaningful understanding of the subject material.

In the area of Social Emotional Learning, TCS provides an advisory program that empowers students to develop useful work habits, practice social skills, and develop a positive mindset toward their ability to do well in school. TCS is a setting where students can enhance their social and emotional development by building strong relationships with their peers and teachers. They are provided with more one-on-one support from staff that promotes student engagement and interest within the classroom. Students at TCS have the opportunity to enhance their academic growth by challenging their knowledge to take on more difficult tasks.

In the area of student engagement, TCS, students are offered the ability to receive interventions for additional academic related support, enrichment, which provides STEM or art related instruction, and enhanced core, which provides additional core instruction for students who are above grade level. Students at TCS can also explore various interests through elective/exploratory classes, clubs, organizations and other teacher-planned activities. Examples of involvement TCS has offered to students include: theater, visual arts, STEM, student

government association, outdoor education, foreign language, mythology, creative writing, and chorus.

PRESENT STUDY

Some researchers look at evidence of academic success solely through standardized scores, without considering an individual student's perspective regarding their academic success. In order to further the research on academic success and assist TCS in understanding the academic success of their students, consideration needs to be given to student perceptions. Semi structured interviews and surveys are ways that schools can collect rewarding information regarding their student's success and factors that promote their academic performance (Manz, 2007). This study focused on eighth graders who have completed all of their middle school experience at TCS regarding their academic success as related to their development of resiliency, social emotional learning, and student engagement, and the impact of school climate.

Research Questions

What are student perceptions on:

1. Factors of resiliency that have impacted their academic success and how TCS supported their development of resiliency?
2. Factors of social and emotional learning that have impacted their academic success and how TCS supported their development of social and emotional learning?
3. Factors of student engagement that have impacted their academic success and how TCS supported their development of student engagement?
4. Factors of school climate that have impacted their academic success and how the school climate at TCS supported their academic success?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of nine 8th graders who have attended TCS in Jackson County NC during the previous two academic years as 6th and 7th graders. These students were identified by TCS personnel as eligible based on inclusion criteria.

Materials

Each participant in the study was asked to participate in one individual interview. Interviews included a series of questions related to the students' perceptions of how their experiences at TCS contributed to their success. The areas addressed included four factors related to student success including Resiliency, Social and Emotional Learning, Student Engagement, and School Climate. An interview protocol was developed and used for each student interviewed (see Appendix A). The questions in this protocol followed the same format for each of the four areas addressed. The interviews began with an overview of the purpose of the interview. Then for each area representing one factor related to academic success, the student was provided with a definition of the factor being addressed (Resiliency, Social and Emotional Learning, Student Engagement, and School Climate) and then asked if they understand or needed further explanation. Then the students were asked two questions. First, they were asked whether they have demonstrated that factor during their time at TCS this past year. They were encouraged to provide examples of how they have or have not demonstrated this factor. Second, they were asked whether they remember having opportunities at TCS to develop these skills. Finally, after covering each of the four areas of academic success, the students were asked to rate their feelings of being successful from two separate academic settings (see Appendix B). They

were asked if they felt “Very Successful”, “Somewhat Successful” or “Not at all Successful” based on their time at TCS and based on their previous school experiences.

Procedure

The selection of student participants in this research was completed in collaboration with school personnel at TCS, who also took place as a committee member within this study. Nine eighth graders (5 boys; 4 girls) were chosen to participate. They were predicted to have a variety of previous academic experiences and that they would provide various feedback for data collection. Before completing the interviews, a digital copy of parental consent was obtained through the system *Qualtrix*. Once this was completed, TCS personnel organized semi-structured interviews with the participants within their school setting. Interviews lasted 20-30 minutes and were completed using the platform *Zoom*. Each interview was recorded by using *Zoom* and transcribed by the platform or was manually typed by the examiner. The platform *Zoom* was used to obtain any missed information recorded by the examiner at the time of the interviews.

Analysis

Some of the transcriptions were completed through the zoom program and some were hand transcribed. After coding, the team listened to video and audio recordings collected by *Zoom* to back up the information shared by students. Using word frequency, themes were identified through coding of components or fragments of ideas or experiences (in the transcriptions) which often are meaningless when viewed alone. The data collected was analyzed using the qualitative software program *NVivo* and a thematic analysis was completed across all participants within each of the areas covered in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis was written as suggested by Gopaldas (2016). Using word frequency, we looked at

words and statements associated with those words that were common across participants. For example, forms of the words “help” or “helping” were identified across participants. When looking at the statements associated with those words, we saw that students helped or received help from others. When combining these ideas, the theme “Kids Helping Kids” emerged.

Results

The themes identified in this study were not structured in a way to answer each specific research question. Data collected was found to be intertwined within ideas across all areas (resiliency, social-emotional learning, student engagement, school climate) of academic success. The discussions with the students were gathered into four major themes: Kids Helping Kids, Coping Rooms, Teacher Modeling and Help with Learning.

Kids Helping Kids

It has been noted in the research that middle school students are undergoing cognitive changes that make it an ideal time to teach autonomy at a higher level and engage in developing their social-emotional repertoire. Students in the second decade of life have an increasing capacity and drive to engage in more complex self-reflection, perspective taking, and reflective judgement than younger children. This coupled with growing interest in identity and moral commitments make adolescence an important developmental period in which to specifically cultivate transformative civic and social emotional competencies (Domitrovich, 2022). From the transcriptions, students noted a significant level of social emotional learning specifically relating to how they interacted with peers.

Specifically, the students related experiences of helping other children or how other children supported them:

[I have] better bonds with the people in my classes

[I] Try to be there for others

My peers have helped me with stress

They also contrasted this with experiences from other schools:

{It felt} extremely overwhelming, 900 students, didn't feel the help was gained and I was at my old school before this I didn't really fit into any of the like kid groups that they that we had like with the smaller environment of Catamount school I think it's easier to make like better bonds with the people in my classes.

When discussing time of distress, students reported feelings such as “*I was sad and some kids asked me what was wrong*”, which suggested there were positive social interactions while students were enrolled in TCS. Sometimes students shared that their interactions at previous schools were tied with bullying: “*I don't get bullied in this school*”. The students reflected that their peers looked out for them rather than beating them down emotionally. Studies show that the last two years of middle school are the peak at which students start to grasp an awareness of their safety in their academic environment (Lacoe, 2020). However, this idea declines as students enter high school. Safety related examples include acts of bullying, which was clearly stated above from a student's previous experiences at another school. Incidents of bullying are prone to be stronger predictors of why a student may not feel safe at school as opposed to an exposure to crime (Lacoe, 2020). However, it seems apparent that these students felt the environment was not only safe but allowed them to rely on their peers in many circumstances.

The overarching idea of empathy was present in the theme Kids Helping Kids. Empathy refers to “an individual's ability to recognize the emotions of others, understand their emotional

reactions and experiences, and respond appropriately” (Xiang, Qui, & Zheng, 2022, p.2735). As stated in Wormeli (2014), empathy is an important factor that relates to academic success. Many students mentioned this as an important part of their daily life at TCS. It is also something that was obviously lacking in their previous k-12 experiences.

Silke et al. (2023) stated the need for schools to explicitly teach skills on empathy in the classrooms. Empathy is correlated with positive peer social interactions, social competence and limited acts of bullying and delinquency. While it is unclear if this is directly taught at TCS or simply modeled, it is obvious that these students experience compassion from their peers. The feedback from students within this study suggests they rely heavily on their peers, and the connections built between them. The deeper the relationship developed between individuals, the more likely students will express empathy and prosocial behaviors in other circumstances (Pfister et al., 2024). Students report being there for their peers and displaying acts of kindness toward academic growth. There appears to be greater awareness of other’s needs. *“taking care of friends and other people, if they struggling in a class – offer to help”*. These skills, “essential fabric for building and sustaining functional interpersonal relationships. Without such an ability, social interaction crumbles, engagement fails, and learning is eroded.” (Tikkanen, et al. 2022, p. 1).

Coping Rooms

On multiple occasions, the students shared their experience with cool down spaces/calming corners implemented within TCS to be of use when in distress. Calming spaces in schools and classrooms are just that— “spaces that allow students who are feeling stressed or emotionally dysregulated to practice self-regulation and coping skills so that they can return to learning with minimal disruption to themselves or others” (Buckner, 2022, p.2). Eisenberg et al. (2020)

mentions the importance of children having a place to regulate their own inner states in response to challenging situations. A student who has just been bullied for example, is allowed the space to regulate their inner feelings without fully shutting down in the classroom. Having a place to regulate to a calmer state is useful prior to talking with a trusted adult.

Students seem to indicate that these were important and not something that was available at other schools they attended. For example, one student mentioned the “*Cloffice*”. This is a specific cool down space designated for students in times of stress. This was mentioned by several other students.

We have a cool down corner in each class. If you have a bad day, it helps you refocus.

On some occasions, it is related to having someone to talk to when calming down. A student shared:

They always give us the option, when we feel like we can't handle what is happening at the moment - we can take 5 minutes off away from people – they always give us that option and if we need to talk to someone about it we can.

Students appear to search for that support when it was needed. Time out spaces are often used for younger children and children with disabilities, but they are rarely used in middle school classrooms. According to Minero and Gonser (2021), this is an important and often neglected part of prepubescent development. Children this age are often confronted with extreme emotions “this period of intense cognitive growth occurs at the same time as students are acclimating to the pressures of middle school with new teachers, complex schedules, and increased academic demands” (p.1). It seems extremely positive that TCS is implementing this type of self-regulatory practice. While the students might not have specifically understood the concept of

social emotional learning, they did seem to know and appreciate the cool down rooms. While they did not directly link this to self-regulation, they are indeed describing this very thing.

Children who practice good self-regulation are reported to constructively handle conflict and their emotions and to be socially appropriate and well-liked by their peers (Eisenberg et al., 2024). A longitudinal study by Robson et al. (2020) reported associations of self-regulation with relatively high social competence, and relatively low peer victimization. Analyzing these traits at just one point in a child's life may fail to show strong correlations. This suggests that observing a child's interactions with others (e.g., social competence) and how they manage their emotions (e.g., self-regulation) without considering their development over time may not provide an accurate representation of their abilities in these areas. In summary, self-regulation and social competence are stable over time. Research supports these connections may be established early on in a child's developmental state which are impacted through a series of social interactions, which are often practiced in middle school. Because we can't predict how strong a student's emotional regulation skills are, we can't expect them to be able to shut down feelings of anger, frustration and other sudden and overwhelming emotions when challenges arise within the academic setting. Students who were able to use the "cloffice" experienced positive self-regulation practices and impacted their success in the classroom.

Teacher Modeling

Students consistently shared their perceptions of their previous school settings and the negative impact their teacher had on their success. On many occasions, students described their teachers weren't "*in the role as a teacher*", someone who is there for their students and motivating them to do well. They found that they didn't feel strong teacher-student bonds and that they were alone. Students shared examples from their previous settings:

Teachers weren't wanting to teach. They weren't there for the students.

They didn't care about students; They cared about themselves.

I was alone of course I had a few good friends but here at Catamount School to use it as we say in our motto we're a village.

Coach/teacher help set goals, very encouraging, help boost each other up.

Minero and Gonser (2021) state that teachers who model being 'present' within the classroom are modeling calm behaviors for students to see and ultimately practice. Children who are educated in a community that prioritizes, practices and praises skills of empathy, are more likely going to try it themselves (Pfister et al., 2024). I believe that teachers and staff at TCS are not just implementing structured regulations to maximize the school's benefits, they are embodying values that positively impact the entire community, particularly through their influence on students.

Instead of staff creating what the students might call "silly" rules, which seem to primarily serve to improve the school's image and external statistics, TCS staff, is genuinely promoting practical skills that help students succeed and thrive in the learning environment, while also giving them opportunities to practice these skills directly with their students.

The theme of students helping students is already present, but the results of this study suggest that TCS is doing a good job of allowing teachers to help students as well. Teachers at TCS seem to have a greater motive than simply instructing; they are building connections with their students by fostering trust and implementing supportive practices that promote student academic growth.

Help with Learning

Tennant et al (2015) emphasized how the student-teacher relationship leads to more than just a positive classroom climate but has been found in the research to be a mediator to student engagement and high academic achievement. Students perceived their teachers' academic strategies more positively than their previous teachers at other schools. The students described their current experiences as more welcoming, and they felt their teachers had good intentions for their success. Students said

{You have} multiple chances to get stuff right, lets you retry, gives feedback

Teachers are good at their job, how we present ourselves as being a place to really learn compared to other schools I have been. Here it is student first, really trying for student feedback.

{They} make sure we feel safe and proficient like efficient in our in our school to make sure we um and make sure we feel don't feel bad about like what we're learning or anything they try and help us as best they can um umm like all the teachers are really nice they're really caring um I'd say that's a really big part of it because they're all really patient even with the annoying kids.

Classroom climate, which may be nothing more than an environment that is relaxed, welcoming, and a place where a student feels safe to make mistakes is essential for student motivation and subsequently successful learning. Positive teacher-student relationships are born out of those circumstances (Loredana et al., 2019). On multiple occasions, the students related scenarios in which teachers are motivating and assist them on many levels.

The teachers will always help you out. TCS like help you stay on task, help you like do whatever you're doing, like I feel like that's a good way that they help you with that like they also try and get you to do independent work by yourself. Others related the teacher's behaviors to be quite caring and encouraging: *They make sure we don't feel bad about what we are learning and try to help us the best they can. All the teachers are nice and really caring. That is a really big part of it*".

Students who feel that they are supported during challenging tasks or are treated fairly by their teachers are more likely to show higher engagement in classroom activities or intrinsic motivation (Loredana et al., 2019). Students want to feel supported especially in an environment that may not be the easiest for them. Whether that be related to their social-emotional functioning or their ability to understand academic related tasks. Feeling as if they are welcomed into a shared and equal space of maturation, they may feel more inclined to take on the challenges because they have the support they need. Findings from Loredana et al. (2019) reported that supportive relationships within the classroom have a positive effect on self-efficacy. Their findings also suggested that students who perceive better quality behaviors from their teachers have a higher likelihood and ability in accomplishing challenging tasks.

Students relate to the safety of the environment: *"They make us feel safe"*. Students who feel unsafe in their academic environment may be less likely to attend school, feel as if they can't focus, be disruptive in the classrooms or cause other peers to feel less safe and prevent their learning (Lacoe, 2020). Research supports a direct link to students "feeling safe" to decreased behavioral problems and higher academic achievement (Lacoe, 2020, Merchant, et al, 2022).

Near the end of the interviews, participants were asked whether they felt they were successful between their time at TCS and their time at their previous academic setting. They

were asked to rate themselves from “Very Successful”, to “Somewhat Successful” to “Not at all Successful” for each academic experience. Most students rated themselves as feeling “Very Successful” from their time at TCS, while some rated themselves as “Somewhat Successful”. No participants rated themselves as “Not at all Successful” which suggests TCS is making a positive impact to student’s academic achievement. Two participants within the study rated their success the same throughout their time at the previous academic setting and their time at TCS.

Discussion

The themes derived from this study are intertwined with the perceptions of what students felt have positively impacted their time at TCS. However, it should be noted that the themes overlap so much in multiple areas that it was challenging to categorize one theme to only one or two academic factors.

Figure 1.

Diagram of Student Perceptions of Academic Success



The diagram above best illustrates how the themes derived from this study are organized within students' perceptions of what has helped them become successful at TCS. The theme "Kids Helping Kids" addresses areas of empathy and safety in relation to student achievement. Students who feel safe to be themselves and know their peers are there to support rather than judge can positively practice skills of regulation and focus on learning. The theme "Coping Rooms" addresses areas of self-regulation and safety in relation to student achievement. Students find peace knowing they have spaces to quickly cool down and regulate themselves. There is minimal fear regarding the outcomes when these positive supports are in place. Although not explicitly shown in the diagram above, teacher modeling also plays a role within the theme of coping rooms. Teachers provide support not only by offering students a place to destress but also by being available for those who need someone to talk to about their problems. The theme "Teacher Modeling" addresses areas of self-efficacy and empathy in relation to student achievement. Students are shown models of practical behavior in the school, and trust and support are built into the community, enabling students to feel genuinely supported. Lastly, the theme "Help with Learning" addresses areas of self-regulation and self-efficacy in relation to student achievement. When students feel they are equipped with the right resources to succeed, they are more likely to believe in their ability to overcome challenges, as they have learned skills to self-regulate during stressful times. Teachers also contribute to this theme by fostering positive interpersonal interactions with students, which encourages engagement in the classroom. Based on the results of this study, student perceptions of academic success align with the findings in the literature review. A student's achievement in school is not always determined by the grades they earn or the scores they receive on a test. What demonstrates a student's capability to succeed is their belief in their own abilities, their capacity to empathize with their peers and

build strong bonds, their use of self-regulation to overcome challenges, and the trustworthiness developed through positive teacher-student interactions.

Middle school can be quite a challenging transition for children. They are surrounded by novel academic and social changes, and it can appear overwhelming at times. This sensitive developmental period of a child's life occurs within middle school, and it is a critical time to understand skills of empathy and prosocial behavior at its best (Pfister et al., 2024). Students are introduced to smaller classrooms and a much tighter knit community with their peers. The kids who enter the program sometimes have experienced stressful situations and overwhelming experiences at their previous schools. This is something students can relate to with their peers. They were not all academically supported previously, so they can empathize with each other. From then on, students learn to build trust with others and essentially *have each other's back*. They help each other succeed.

Students want to feel safe, especially when they are not in a place of immediate relief. They are surrounded by stressors that overwhelm their abilities to think and make decisions effectively. Based on the student's perceptions from this study, it is not a secret that they appreciate and require the spaces for cool downs for self-regulating their behaviors. They are able to handle challenges in that moment in time, to quickly transition back to important matters within the classroom. You could say this is how students learn resiliency, especially when measures are put in place, such as the coping spaces. Students are also given the choice to make up for their mistakes and not scolded for being a kid. There is a sense of maturation for those entering this program, because previous settings never gave them that independence. They have the ability to make the better decision and when given a choice, students at TCS take advantage of bettering themselves.

TCS displays a safe and thriving community, and its teachers are one step ahead of other schools. The teachers at TCS model the behaviors and social emotional skills they want to see in the students entering the program. They make themselves available and open a space for a trusting environment, especially for those who maybe did not have that at their previous schools. Some students may not have felt like they could take on the challenges for their success but because TCS allows the students to have that choice and embraces the opportunity to learn and grow from their mistakes, students respond positively to their tactics. Teachers empathize with their students and meet them where they are. They don't push past a child's comfort zone. They work with students on the skill sets they came in with and set positive and achievable goals to better their future and success.

TCS creates a sense of school connectedness. Multiple participants shared the fact that the bigger a school was, the more overwhelming they would become and did not feel they could gain the support from the resources offered. Everyone at the school is doing their part, the teachers and staff and even other students. The students here feel they can get the help they need through the learning structure TCS provides for them. Students are more engaged in class, they are better equipped with independent skills to ask for help from their teachers when it is needed, and getting that support rather than feeling alone.

Limitations and Future Research

The biggest limitation was the fact that many of the students did not understand the questions asked of them, even after providing an explanation to each of the areas (e.g. resiliency, SEL, etc.) that were identified. The questions should have been better created by being more aligned to the language and development level of the participants. While qualitative research usually has a smaller sample, some of the participants were not as forthcoming, and therefore

there was less data in the final product. A larger sample size would have been beneficial for the researchers to have an even larger variety of responses while ruling out transcriptions of the students who did not actively participate in answering the questions.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to interview students at TCS and determine how resiliency, social and emotional learning, student engagement, and school climate have impacted their academic success and how TCS supported their development. The results of this study seem to reflect that all four themes appear to be related to academic success. A student at TCS is safe with teachers and students, feels that they are in a place where they can make mistakes and be given an opportunity to set things right. Students at TCS are thriving on the variety of resources provided to them and within a well-rounded and supportive community. These students appear to be given a second chance at working toward their future and the findings support the fact they are taking advantage of it in numerous ways.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interviews

Resiliency

1. Resiliency is defined as the ability to recover quickly from difficulties.
2. Do you have any questions about what is meant by resiliency?
3. Do you feel like you have demonstrated resiliency at TCS this year?
 - a. If yes, provide some examples of situations where you were resilient
 - b. If no, provide some examples of situations where you weren't resilient
4. Do you remember anything from your time at TCS that helped you to develop skills in the area of resiliency?

Social Emotional Development

5. Social and emotional development is defined as the ability to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.
6. Do you have any questions about what is meant by social and emotional development?
7. Do you feel like you have demonstrated social emotional development at TCS this year?
 - a. If yes, provide some examples of situations where you practiced social and emotional development
 - b. If no, provide some examples of situations where you did not practice social and emotional development

8. Do you remember anything from your time at TCS that helped you to develop skills in the area of social and emotional development?

Student Engagement

9. Student engagement is defined as a student's active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, and commitment to educational goals and learning.
10. Do you have any questions about what is meant by student engagement?
11. Do you feel like you have demonstrated student engagement at TCS this year?
 - a. If yes, provide some examples of situations where you were engaged
 - b. If no, provide some examples of situations where you weren't engaged
12. Do you remember anything from your time at TCS that helped you to develop skills in the area of student engagement?

School Climate

13. School climate is defined as the quality and character a school presents.
14. Do you have any questions about what is meant by school climate?
15. Do you feel like you have had a positive school climate at TCS this year?
 - a. If yes, provide some positive examples of your school climate
 - b. If no, provide some examples of the lack of school climate
16. How does it compare to your previous school?

APPENDIX B

Academic Success Survey

Rating of academic success for each of the following:

- a. The years they spent at TCS
 - i. Not at all Successful
 - ii. Somewhat Successful
 - iii. Very Successful
- b. Their elementary school years.
 - i. Not at all Successful
 - ii. Somewhat Successful
 - iii. Very Successful