# Refining Resilience: Grit, Growth Mindset, and Mindfulness in Adolescent Females

by

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## ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental, mixed-methods action research study explored perceived levels of resilience for academic and peer-related settings among sixth-grade females in an independent middle school. A 5-week after-school intervention aimed to provide treatment participants with the opportunity to foster resilience by utilizing grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness practices. Pre and postsurveys ($n$ = 26) completed by treatment and control groups showed that sixth-grade females experience a number of different academic and peer-related stressors with some of the most common stressors including bad grades in a class and feeling left out by peers. Survey findings also showed that treatment and control participants rated themselves highest in areas of flexibility for both peer and academic settings. Treatment and control participants rated themselves lowest on questions related to self-efficacy and emotional regulation in both peer and academic settings. While there were not statistically significant increases in perceived levels of resilience found for the treatment group pre- and post-intervention, interviews with treatment participants ($n$ = 16) and workshop artifacts indicated that students found the exercises taught in the intervention helpful to navigate academic and peer related stressors they encounter. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

# DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” Colossians 3:17.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

> There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.
>
> —Colin Powell

In a country with increasing competition in the workforce and demands for academic achievement, many parents want to provide their children with every advantage possible for success. Parents may question the best ways to successfully prepare their children for adulthood. For me, as a mother of three young children and a K–12 music teacher, this question remains at the forefront of my mind: What skills are helpful to prepare our youth for their futures in an ever-changing world? According to scholars, the development of resilience among children can contribute to a number of benefits, such as social and emotional well-being and a decrease in mental health challenges (McDonald et al., 2019). Anghel (2020) expanded upon the need to identify factors to increase resilience: "In order to prevent or reduce these risks, it is essential to understand what factors place children at risk, as well as what protective factors may be fostered in order to improve and support resilience" (p. 104). This action research study examined a 5-week intervention designed to increase perceived levels of resilience of middle school females in both academic and peer-related settings at an independent, college-preparatory middle school.

Masten (2001) stated that "resilience refers to a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). In my place of practice, I have witnessed students' lack of resilience in a number of ways,

including students crying or arguing with the teacher if they receive less than an A grade, looking to adults for solutions instead of utilizing problem-solving skills, or immediately going to administrators instead of talking to teachers about issues. The 2020–2021 school year of virtual, in-person, and hybrid learning due to COVID-19 presented students, teachers, and parents with new challenges. I witnessed many students struggling both academically and socially. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, I believed that students would benefit from tools to build resilience and coping skills, perhaps now more than ever before (Kanekar & Sharma, 2020).

## National and International Context

Scholars and educators have recognized the importance of educating students in more than just academics since at least the early 20th century. While the terminologies and times have changed, the need for educating the "whole child" remains. As early as 1933, educators recognized a disconnect between teachers' perceived personal influences on student character development and the lack of teaching character development in the curriculum. For example, an article in the 1933 *Journal of Educational Research* indicated that in order to develop the whole child, the incorporation of skills and qualities such as social responsibility, healthy habits, loyalty, honesty, courage, cooperation, and self-control should be included in the educational curriculum. Scholars continue to recognize the need for researching and creating frameworks to instill non-cognitive traits in relation to education and child development (Arif & Mirza, 2017; Cortazar & Calvete, 2019; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Garmezy, 1991a; Kobasa, 1979; Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2008).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) have become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating quality, equity, and efficiency of school systems. PISA results have shown that countries where students are highly motivated to achieve also tend to be the countries where many students feel anxious about a test, even if they are well prepared for it (OECD, 2017). Teachers need to find ways to encourage students' motivation to learn and achieve without generating an excessive fear of failure. Schools are not just places where students acquire academic skills; they can also help students become more resilient in the face of adversity, feel more connected with the people around them, and aim higher in their aspirations for their future. Schools are the first place where children experience society in all its facets, and those experiences can have a profound influence on students' attitudes and behavior in life (OECD, 2017).

According to Wagner and Dintersmith (2016), K–12 schools have generally trended toward instruction based upon high-stakes testing and college admissions. Preparing students for life may fall to a distant second in this context, particularly in middle school and high school. The net result of this means adolescents are spending their most formative years preparing for assessments and not for life. Olsson et al. (2003) wrote:

> The term resilience has been variously used to describe a substance of elastic qualities, the capacity for successful adaptation to a changing environment, and the character of hardiness and invulnerability. More recently, resilience has been conceptualized as a dynamic process involving an interaction between both risk and protective processes, internal and external to the individual, that act to modify the effects of an adverse life event. Resilience does not so much imply an invulnerability to stress, but rather an ability to recover from negative events. (pp. 1–2)

According to Dweck (2010), research has shown that praising students for the process and the effort applied, the strategies used, the choices made, and the persistence displayed yields more long-term benefits than telling them they are smart only when they succeed.

Adolescent students from affluent settings, like many of the students at the site of the present study, have been stereotypically considered low risk (Liang et al., 2016), yet Luthar and Barkin (2012) and Luthar et al. (2013) observed a new "at risk" category in these adolescents. In studies of risk and resilience, the definition of "at risk" is described in terms of statistical probabilities, where the occurrence of problems is statistically higher in the presence of a particular condition (Luthar et al., 2013). Luthar and Barkin (2012) reported that affluence can place upper-middle-class youth in positions where they experience vulnerability and fragility. The authors stated up front that their research is based on a counterintuitive notion: "that upper-middle class youth, who are en route to the most prestigious universities and well-paying careers in America, are more likely to be more troubled than their middle-class counterparts" (p. 1529). The participants in the 2012 study were from predominantly white-collar, well-educated families and attended schools with rigorous curricula, diverse extracurricular offerings, and high standardized test scores. The sample groups came from homes where annual salaries were far above twice the national average (Luthar et al., 2013). According to the research, affluent adolescents were much more likely than their lower-socioeconomic peers to use and abuse cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs. The lowest levels of abstinence from these substances were among high-socioeconomic adolescent females (Luthar et al., 2013). Instead of being praised for intrinsic qualities such as character and purpose, youth are being raised in a society that glorifies money, image, career, and other extrinsic successes

(Damon, 2008). In addition, "the most distressed affluent girls viewed their parents as emphasizing their accomplishments more than their character" (Liang et al., 2016, p. 849).

The intervention for this action research study was designed to increase students' perceived resilience by teaching grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness in order to increase students' perceived capabilities to navigate setbacks in both academic and peer settings. The concepts of grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness are briefly described below and in more detail in Chapter 2.

Duckworth et al. (2007) defined *grit* as "individuals' perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). The researchers hypothesized that consistent commitment to a goal is just as important as perceived levels of talent. They suggested that children with similar talent and work ethic can have different levels of grit, but, for example, a child who moves from playing the piano, to the guitar, and then to a different instrument will likely be surpassed by a child who is similarly gifted but has more consistent follow-through.

Individuals' beliefs about the malleability of personal characteristics such as intelligence, different types of ability, and personality are known as *implicit theories* (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Dweck (2006) has more recently referred to these implicit theories in her research as "fixed" and "growth" mindsets. Dweck (2006) defined the fixed mindset as "believing that one's qualities are carved in stone" (p. 6). In turn, Dweck (2006) defined the growth mindset as being "based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others" (p. 7).

Although mindfulness has been described and defined by a number of researchers (Cortazar & Calvete, 2019; Kabat-Zinn, 2003), Bishop et al. (2004) claimed the field of mindfulness has not yet achieved an operational definition. Bishop et al. (2004) proposed a two-component operational definition of mindfulness: (a) self-regulating attention to keep it focused on immediate reality, allowing for more accurate awareness of mental events in the present moment, and (b) adopting a specific attitude toward one's current interactions, one that is marked by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

## Local Context

For the past 17 years, I have had the privilege of teaching choir and piano to students at all grades at Oakwood Academy (a pseudonym). Founded in 1971 and located in a southern state, Oakwood Academy is a private, independent college preparatory school serving preschool through 12th grade. The school charges the highest tuition rates in the state, with a majority of the student population coming from affluent backgrounds. The school serves approximately 1,345 students and consists of four separate divisions: the Early Childhood Center (Pre-K–kindergarten), the Lower School (Grade 1–Grade 4), the Middle School (Grade 5–Grade 8), and the Upper School (Grade 9–Grade 12).

Grade 6—the context of this study—had 74 students enrolled at the time of this study. Of those students, 36 were female. Non-White enrollment school-wide was 25%, with a 22.3% enrollment in the Middle School of students who identify as Black, Latinx, or of Asian descent. Oakwood Academy's vision is "to be the leader in innovative education," with a mission statement of "inspiring students to explore, create, contribute, and achieve." Oakwood Academy is one of the few non-religiously affiliated private schools in the area. The students' SAT scores average 1222, and ACT scores have

averaged 27 over the past 5 years. The school is consistently recognized as the top-rated private school in the state by Niche, a ranking and review site for educational institutions.

Five years into my career as an educator, I became a mother, which further fueled my passion for education, particularly in regard to the importance of educating the whole child. During my time in the classroom setting, I have observed students who encounter challenges when attempting to bounce back from perceived failure and challenges in both peer and academic settings. Students seem to wrestle with feelings of inadequacy, fear of taking risks, and an inability to self-advocate in both academic and social settings. For example, a student may perceive receiving a B or C on an assignment as a failure and struggle to navigate moving forward with confidence. An example of this in a social setting may be a student who witnesses a form of bullying in the classroom and has trouble finding the courage to stand up and advocate for her peer.

A recent example that occurred in my classroom involved two students who were struggling over parental pressures and academic assignment demands. The choir room is a place where most students can catch their breath and leave things at the door, but sometimes they are bearing too much and bring it with them into the classroom. I am quick to invite them aside and get them to focus on mindful, deep breaths. Once I am able to get their breathing calm, I ask if they would like to share anything with me. For one student, the challenge arose over an assignment for an eighth-grade literature class. The other student was visibly upset and anxious over receiving a 95% in her ninth-grade government class. She made comments such as “I’m just not smart enough; ninth grade is

just so hard; my parents want me to go to an Ivy League school; there is so much pressure on me."

In a previous cycle of action research, I interviewed one of the school administrators. He talked about how, when he was a teenager, he had already learned to change his own flat tires, work a part-time job, cook something on the stove, do his laundry, and other core life skills. He discussed countless ways in his experience as an administrator where parents come to their child's rescue in middle and high school instead of teaching them and allowing them the opportunity to practice navigating challenges and building these skills on their own. He even mentioned that parents sometimes interfere with their child's friend groups if their child is not in the friend group the parents prefer.

Many of these students have over-extended commitments, as their parents may manage and dictate their after-school activities. Some students from Oakwood Academy often arrive home late from practice or other commitments to begin homework and complain about how little sleep they are able to get. We have students who feel pressured to get As with a schedule of all advanced placement (AP) classes in their junior and senior years because that is required (with respect to grade point average) to be toward the top of each graduating class. To highlight this point, the school's 2019 valedictorian was 16 years old and went on to attend Harvard University. Students may constantly feel like they are falling short when they compare and measure their own growth by the successes of others.

## My Leadership Role

Faculty members of Oakwood Academy are encouraged to incorporate the four core values of the school into our teaching curriculum. The four core values are respect, responsibility, excellence, and integrity. While these values serve as cornerstones for the school, they do not necessarily teach students how to bounce back from failure or provide students with opportunities to practice navigating setbacks in academic and peer situations. For example, how should a student respond if a peer treats him/her in a disrespectful manner? How should a student handle a situation where a fellow student is not being responsible for his/her own part in a group project? What are some possible and productive ways to navigate dishonesty in academic and peer situations? Stating, teaching, and demonstrating the core values is simply not enough to prepare students to face and cope with the challenges they encounter on a regular basis.

As the choral and piano teacher of middle and high school students, I choose to take time out from my planned curriculum to help students work through challenges that organically present themselves during class. For example, if my students are rehearsing in small groups and a student comes to me to complain about another student, I place the onus of problem solving on the complaining student and help them walk through possible solutions to resolve or improve the problem. As the teacher, my leadership role is demonstrated when I seize these types of opportunities to teach students skills beyond music.

## Purpose of the Study

My problem of practice addressed a perceived lack of resilience in female middle school students, both academically and in peer relationships. In our school, middle school

students are in fifth to eighth grades. This study focused on female students for the following reasons, demonstrated by the existing literature:

- Affluent adolescent females demonstrate more challenges in adjusting to different settings compared with males (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Lyman & Luthar, 2014).
- The greater challenges adolescent females experience in comparison with adolescent males may be related to struggles with self-esteem and self-acceptance (Lyman & Luthar, 2014).
- Although opportunities for females to experience greater success are increasing in the United States, adolescent females may be more prone to experience higher expectations and pressure from adults "to be more ambitious, smart, caring, fit, and accomplished than their peers" (Liang et al., 2016, p. 848).
- Adolescent females are especially vulnerable to the dangers of affluence, reporting higher levels of psychological distress than either wealthy males or inner-city females (Lund & Dearing, 2013; Lyman & Luthar, 2014).

My intervention, titled "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop," aimed to equip female sixth-grade students with tools to develop and practice resilience. This study investigated the following three research questions:

RQ1: How and to what extent does the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" increase sixth-grade middle school female students' perceived levels of resilience in academic situations?

RQ2: How and to what extent does the “Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop” increase sixth-grade middle school female students’ perceived levels of resilience in peer relationships at school?

RQ3: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students describe stressors that they experience in peer and academic settings?

RQ4: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students exhibit and discuss resilience during the “Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop”?

# CHAPTER 2

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP

> Students who only know how to perform well in today's education system—get good grades and test scores, and earn degrees—will no longer be those who are most likely to succeed. Thriving in the twenty-first century will require real competencies, far more than academic credentials.
>
> —Tony Wagner, *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era*

The development of resilience among adolescents is growing increasingly critical as our nation enters the innovation era and navigates the current and aftereffects of COVID-19. The "innovation era" demands risk takers, problem solvers, and critical thinkers. People are not born resilient (Masten, 2001). Instead, resilience is a process of adapting to adversity (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Educators have the opportunity to aid the process of resilience development by being intentional in providing safe places for students to take risks and make mistakes at home, in social settings, and in the classroom.

Youth in poverty are commonly regarded as being at risk, but researchers have found that there are also significant challenges arising at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum (Luthar et al., 2013). In this section, I first discuss definitions of resilience. Next, I provide a description of resilience theory, which guided this study, and discuss positive, non-cognitive traits including grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness that may contribute to and support resilience in adolescents. I conclude with a discussion of my previous cycles of action research that influenced the study.

## Defining Resilience

There are a number of definitions for resilience in the academic community. The word *resilience* comes from the root *resile*, which means "to bounce or spring back" (from *re-* "back" + *salire-* "to run, leap"; Agnes, 2005). Resilience can be described as the ability to bounce back from stressful events or situations (Smith et al., 2008). Garmezy (1991b) defined resilience as "not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behavior that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating a stressful event" (p. 459). Masten (2001) defined resilience as "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). Rutter (2006) described resilience as "an interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences" (p. 2). He argued that resilience is more than social competence or good mental health; resilience requires competence as well as adversity.

According to Ungar (2008), a consistent concept of resilience that captures the dual emphasis of the individual and the individual's social ecology has yet to be given, as well as how the two must be taken into account when deciding parameters for assessing outcomes and discerning processes associated with resilience. Ungar (2008) contended that resilience is composed of multiple factors, including "the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experience in culturally meaningful ways" (p. 225). For this

study, I used the definition by Smith et al. (2008), who defined resilience as the ability to bounce back from stressful events or situations.

## Resilience Theory

Resilience theory is a conceptual framework for understanding and informing intervention designs in a strength-based approach on how some individuals can bounce back in life after experiencing adverse situations (Zimmerman, 2013). Resilience has been studied for decades under a number of different concepts, such as *hardiness* (Kobasa et al., 1982) and *grit* (Duckworth, et al., 2007). Many studies have measured resilience among participants experiencing what many consider strong adversities, such as poverty, disease, natural disasters, public health crises, and trauma (Richards & Dixon, 2020). Key researchers and theorists of resilience include Garmezy (1991a), Luthar et al. (2000), Masten (2001), Rutter (2006), Werner (1994), and Ungar (2005). Wright and Masten (2005) contended that there have been at least three waves of resilience research that have continuously refined and redefined resilience theory. I discuss each of these in the following sections.

### First Wave

Early research on resilience (e.g., Kobasa, 1979) proposed that people who encounter high levels of stress without "falling ill" have a personality structure that sets them apart from those who become sick under stress. Kobasa (1979) described this personality difference as hardiness (p. 3). This early research was influenced by a culture in the United States of glorified rugged individualism, which may be better described as the ability to "pick oneself up by one's own bootstraps" and thrive on one's ability alone (Wright & Masten, 2005, p. 18). According to Pines (1975, as cited in Masten, 2001),

"One of the earliest news articles about resilience in American psychology was about 'the invulnerables' in the *APA Monitor*" (p. 227). Other terms and traits in the early stages of resilience research to describe people who thrived despite adversity include invulnerability, inner fortitude, coping, and character armor (Anthony, 1974; Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The first wave of resilience research defined both person-focused and variable-focused factors associated with resilience such as child, family, community, and cultural characteristics (Masten, 2001). However, it was not until the second wave of resilience research that researchers began to identify and understand the processes that lead to resilience (Wright & Masten, 2005).

**Second Wave**

The second wave of resilience research revealed that resilience was not exclusive to the invulnerable or hardy types. Masten (2001) described resilience as "ordinary magic," suggesting that resilience is common and emerges from normal, standard functions of adaptation. Masten (2001) defined resilience as "a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 228). Masten considered resilience to exist within two types of constructs: (a) a presence of a threat and (b) whether the adaptation to the threat is perceived as adequate or acceptable. Masten's study concluded with acknowledging a need for outlining how positive adaptive systems operate and develop under different conditions as well as how they can work for or against the success of a developing child. Studies have found that a child's resilience is dependent on other people as well as other systems of influence, such as the family, school, neighborhood, community, and culture (Riley & Masten, 2005).

Longitudinal research in the field correlates with Masten's description of resilience as ordinary magic, highlighting that a high percentage of youth growing up in adverse settings have had excellent long-term outcomes (Winders, 2014). Garmezy (1991b) researched children who grew up in poverty and concluded that fewer than half of participants replicated the patterns of their parents or caregivers later in life. Similar conclusions were found in Werner's longitudinal study of children in Kauai, Hawaii, in 1955. Werner, along with a team of pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists, and health/social workers, began a 30-year study of more than 600 high-risk pregnancies from birth. Werner and the team documented two trends: "(1) the impact of reproductive stress diminished with time, and (2) the developmental outcome of virtually every biological risk condition was dependent on the quality of the rearing environment" (Werner, 1994, p. 131). Research in the second wave concluded that resilience is a basic human adaptive system (Masten, 2001) instead of the earlier ideas that adverse conditions had a negative impact on those who were not born with hardiness or coping strategy traits (Carver et al., 1989; Kobasa, 1979).

**Third Wave**

A third wave of research occurring around 2000 presented descriptions of resilience frameworks and intervention models for practice and policy that are commonly described as protective processes to promote resilience (Wright & Masten, 2005). In order to foster resilience, researchers including Masten and Coatsworth (1998) defined three large categories of protective factors: (a) personality traits or temperament (within the child), (b) family traits or assets, and (c) environmental factors outside of the family environment.

As researchers move forward in resilience research and intervention, Wright and Masten (2005) stated,

> A critical challenge . . . will be to address the discrepancies between research findings and public policy and to work effectively to educate policymakers about the importance of comprehensive, universally accessible prevention programs. A primary focus for future work in this area will be systematic study of the best ways to translate research on resilience processes into effective policies and programs that promote the competence and well-being of the next generation and thereby enhance the human capital that all vibrant societies need in order to succeed. (p. 33)

## Additional Research

While much of the research on resilience is focused on at-risk populations such as low socioeconomic status, low-performing schools, and cancer patients, affluent youth can also face challenges. With parents providing tutors and private coaching sessions and expecting high achievement across the board, students may be left with a lack of coping skills and resilience. According to a statement published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, affluent adolescents are a "newly identified at-risk group" (Luthar & Barkin, 2012, p. 429). According to the authors, "affluenza," a metaphorical disease connoting unnecessary material wealth spending, is increasingly spreading among upper-middle-class, white-collar families. Multiple maladjustment domains (substance use, depression, and anxiety) can be elevated in these youth, reflecting an urgent need for preventive interventions (Luthar & Barkin, 2012).

Supportive educational environments and parenting styles allowing a healthy degree of autonomy and problem-solving opportunities could directly contribute to the development of resilience in a child. Luthar et al. (2013) stated,

> It is critical to note that pressures to succeed come not just from parents but as much, if not more so, from outside the family. Coaches and arts teachers, for example, can be highly invested in the performer's star status, setting exacting

> and sometimes extreme standards in quests for their teams' distinction at the district, county, and state levels. Peer group comparisons also contribute, because teens rank themselves against each other in extracurriculars as in academics. (p. 1532)

In one study, Arif and Mirza (2017) explored the effectiveness of an intervention program utilizing a resilience-building module for teacher implementation. According to the authors, "The module comprised of activity-based sessions aiming at fostering protective factors-creativity, internal locus of control, self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, autonomy, sense of purpose in life, optimism, good sense of humor and the teacher-student relationship" (p. 251). The study followed a pre/posttest control group design and was conducted in a public secondary school. Sixty-four Grade 9 and Grade 10 students who were at risk of failure were equally divided between the experimental and the control group. Students were identified by administering a risk identification survey and resilience assessment scale (RAS) developed by the researchers that measured specific risk indicators and protective factors. The control group was treated in the traditional manner, while the experimental group received 3 months of treatment by one of the researchers, who acted as a resilience teacher. The researchers concluded that "the pretest and posttest analysis revealed that the intervention was significantly effective in enhancing students' academic resilience overall and by each selected protective factor" (Arif & Mirza, 2017, p. 256).

When considering change theories for the development of resilience in middle school students, Weick's (1984) strategy of "small wins" may be applicable. He examined the importance and effectiveness of small wins in the context of social problems and policymaking. Weick's strategy of small wins can also serve as a strategy

for adolescents to practice and develop the necessary skills for resilience, grit, and growth mindset. Weick (1984) stated,

> While Kobasa has interpreted hardiness as a personality disposition, pursuit of a small wins strategy could induce more generally the perceptions associated with this disposition. Hardiness is composed of commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment refers to involvement and a generalized sense of purpose that allows people to impose meaning on things, events, and persons. Control is the tendency to act and feel as if one can have a definite influence (not the influence) on situations through the exercise of imagination, knowledge, skill, and choice. People with a sense of control tend to experience events as natural outgrowths of their actions rather than as foreign, overwhelming events. Challenge is the belief that change is an incentive to grow rather than a threat to security. Thus, incongruent events are opportunities rather than disasters. (p. 46)

In order to achieve small wins, the concept of recognizing and acting on "small failures" may also be helpful. Cannon and Edmonson (2005) stated that small failures can often point to early warning signs. If detected and addressed in the early stages, these warning signs may help avoid the larger, more detrimental effects of failure down the road. Cannon and Edmonson (2005) contended that "small failures are often overlooked because at the time they occur they appear to be insignificant minor mistakes or isolated anomalies and thus organizations fail to make timely use of these important learning opportunities" (p. 301). If students are equipped with effective coping strategies in the early stages of adolescence and have the opportunity to navigate perceived failures on a smaller scale, perhaps they will build the resilience necessary to cope with setbacks and challenges in later adolescence and early adulthood.

## Supporting Frameworks for the Intervention

Challenges and setbacks in academic and peer-related settings are unavoidable. It is because of this that resilience is vital for success in school and in life. Yet, what factors contribute to resilience, and what can be done to increase it (Yeager & Dweck, 2012)?

My intervention utilized traits and skills including grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness to support the development of resilience in adolescents.

The term *grit* was developed by Duckworth et al. (2007) and is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Duckworth further explained: "Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087–1088). Duckworth et al. (2007) suggested that grit and follow-through may be as essential as IQ to high achievement. Grit may act as a mediator between growth mindset and academic engagement and achievement. Zeng et al.'s 2016 study indicated that the relationship between growth mindset, school participation, and wellness was mediated by students' resilience.

According to Yeager and Dweck (2012), "fixed" mindsets contribute to both academic underachievement and the impact of peer-related challenges. Their research has shown how "the theory that intelligence is fixed . . . can lead students to interpret academic challenges as a sign . . . that they are . . . or may be seen as 'dumb'" (p. 302). In the same vein, if an adolescent believes that their personality is fixed, they may interpret peer-related challenges as unchangeable. Yeager and Dweck's (2012) research showed that students' mindsets can be changed, which can help them become more resilient. The psychology behind people's ability to alter academically and socially important characteristics can be taught to students. In a 2012 study, Yeager and Dweck found that if students can be taught to see abilities as able to be developed over time—a growth mindset—they are more resilient when they are confronted with challenges.

The practice of mindfulness can help people respond to adversity and stress in more flexible ways, causing them to cope with difficulties and hardships more efficiently. Mindfulness can also possibly improve people's levels of resilience (Cortazar & Calvete, 2019; Epstein & Krasner, 2013; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Wang & Kong, 2019). For example, in a study of university students, Bajaj et al. (2016) discovered a connection between the effect of mindfulness on overall life satisfaction and resilience. Research related to the study of mindfulness has greatly increased in recent years and has associated mindfulness with improved mental and physical health, stronger emotional regulation, and greater life satisfaction (Wang & Kong, 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2020). Kabat-Zinn (2003) described mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment" (p. 145). According to a study conducted by Jha et al. (2019), as cited in Yuan (2021), "Mindfulness training helps individuals accept their present moment in a nonjudgmental manner, thus avoiding negative emotions. Accepting the present moment with a peaceful and nonjudgemental attitude is one of the most important components of resilience" (p. 6).

Developing the practice of mindfulness was addressed in Week 4 of my intervention (described in detail in Chapter 3). When students face pressures from academic or peer-related settings, mindfulness can help them focus on whatever they are doing in the moment, instead of what may have happened during lunch or a test they may have the next morning. Students were introduced to an exercise on mindfulness that incorporated the senses to help connect them to the exact moment. This exercise on mindful breathing includes paying attention to breathing patterns, focusing on a focal

point, focusing on the sound of the air moving in and out of the lungs, and focusing on the smell of the lightly scented candle in the room.

The COVID-19 crisis has been a cause of great anxiety, distress, and stress in the United States. The unexpected and uncertain circumstances caused by this pandemic have left educators with a need to be equipped with more than just textbooks. According to Kanekar and Sharma (2020), "Positive mental health and positive psychology have an imminent role to play during this unprecedented public health crisis" (p. 336). It was my hope that providing students with the tools for grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness would serve as a strong strategy to develop and cultivate resilience during a time when it is perhaps needed most.

## Previous Cycles of Action Research

Throughout my teaching career, I have observed many students who struggle with feelings of failure, inadequacy, fear of taking risks, and the inability to self-advocate. To engage in this action research study, I completed two previous cycles of research. During my research in Cycle 0—the reconnaissance phase (Mertler, 2017)—I interviewed the head of the middle and upper school, the middle school guidance counselor, and the upper school guidance counselor at Oakwood Academy. I chose these faculty members because of their extensive experience with middle school students. At the time of this study, our head of middle and upper school had served primarily as our head of middle school for 7 years and had a great deal of wisdom and experience regarding middle school students and their parents. Our middle school guidance counselor was highly experienced when it came to the daily challenges middle schoolers face, including shifting friendships, bullying, and gossiping. Before becoming the upper school guidance

counselor, my colleague served as a team leader for our seventh-grade faculty and students for more than 10 years. Her passion for students and their well-being led her to seek her master's degree in counseling.

These faculty members answered questions including, but not limited to, the following:

- What examples of resilience have you noticed or observed in our middle school students?
- How might we foster the development of resilience in middle school students?
- How might we equip middle school students with the necessary tools to navigate shifting friendships, bullying, and gossip?

In analyzing these interviews, I found four themes: the importance of (a) implementing a "no rescue policy," (b) teaching empathy, (c) painting a "big-picture" perspective for parents and students in middle school, and (d) obtaining buy-in from students, faculty, and parents on the previously mentioned themes. These findings affirmed my notion concerning the need for developing resilience among middle school students as well as ideas about how this could be addressed in our school. The information was of great benefit as it assisted with the design and focus for the next stage of this study.

One of many examples of this problem of practice is learning to navigate friendship troubles among females in middle school. My 6-week intervention for Cycle 1 was designed to provide fifth-grade students with the tools needed to navigate shifting friendships, bullying, and conflict resolution. For the purposes of Cycle 1, I titled this intervention "Friendship Class." This class was a 6-week workshop provided through the school's "After School Extras" program. The purpose of this project was to increase

students' sense of resilience within the contexts of friendships. The methods used in my Cycle 1 research included recruiting participants who were fifth-grade females interested in gaining skills to navigate friendship challenges. I used discussions and journaling to gather qualitative data. I collected quantitative and qualitative data utilizing a course evaluation via Google Forms on the development of resilience among middle school students. The quantitative data was measured with a 6-point Likert scale to address the survey questions. Four out of the five participants returned the survey.

Analysis showed that although all four students "agreed" on some level with statements such as (a) "I am an independent person," (b) "I believe I am a resilient person," and (c) "I believe I am capable of looking for better/different ways of doing things," there were greater variances in the levels of agreement regarding teacher perceptions of these same questions. Examples of these latter statements included "I believe my teachers help me explore different ways of doing things," and "I believe my teachers help me practice becoming more resilient."

The qualitative results included open-response answers to questions regarding what the students found most helpful in the course as well as the most important thing they learned. Answers to these questions included how to handle jealousy and feeling left out, as well as how to resolve conflict and how and when to reach out to a trusted adult for advice regarding peer-related challenges. The findings helped inform and guide the current intervention and study by providing me with the opportunity to practice both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Previous cycles also confirmed that there was a need for non-cognitive interventions at Oakwood Academy.

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

> No research is ever quite complete. It is the glory of a good bit of work that it opens the way for something still better, and this repeatedly leads to its own eclipse.
>
> —Mervin Gordon

## Research Design

This action research study investigated sixth-grade middle school females' perceived levels of resilience in academic and peer relationships at school and an institutional afterschool intervention designed to increase perceived levels of resilience by equipping students with skills such as grit (Duckworth et al., 2007), growth mindset (Dweck, 2010), and mindfulness. The 5-week afterschool workshop that I designed was titled the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop."

The study was characterized as an action research study because it was guided by the four steps of action research: identifying an area of focus, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and developing a plan of action (Mills, 2011). Once a plan of action has been determined, the action research process may begin. As mentioned, the area of focus in this quasi-experimental action research study was the perceived development of resilience traits in middle school females. I collected data using pre- and postsurveys administered to participants, memos I recorded after each of the five intervention session modules, artifacts from the sessions, and data from the focus group (see Table 1). In what follows, I discuss the study setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

**Table 1**

*Research Questions and Data Sources*

| Question | Data source |
|---|---|
| RQ1: How and to what extent does the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" increase sixth-grade middle school female students' perceived levels of resilience in academic situations? | • Pre- and postsurvey quantitative data from the treatment group |
| RQ2: How and to what extent does the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" increase sixth-grade middle school female students' perceived levels of resilience in peer relationships at school? | • Pre- and postsurvey quantitative data from the treatment group |
| RQ3: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students describe stressors that they experience in peer and academic settings? | • Pre- and postsurvey qualitative data from the treatment group<br>• Workshop artifacts<br>• Focus group |
| RQ4: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students exhibit and discuss resilience during the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop"? | • Workshop artifacts<br>• Focus group<br>• In-process memos |

## Setting

This action research study took place in the middle school of Oakwood Academy, located in a central, southern state. Oakwood Academy was founded in 1971 and is a private, independent college preparatory school serving preschool through 12th grade. The school consists of four separate divisions: the Early Childhood Center (Pre-K–kindergarten), Lower School (Grade 1–Grade 4), Middle School (Grade 5–Grade 8), and Upper School (Grade 9–Grade 12). Each grade level has approximately 100 students enrolled. Non-White enrollment school-wide is 25%, with a 22.3% enrollment encompassing students who identify as Black, Indian American, Asian American, and

Latino in the Middle School. The school does not collect information on socioeconomic status.

## Intervention

Oakwood Academy offers an "After School Extras" (hereafter Extras) program for students Pre-K–Grade 8 to pursue enrichment opportunities. The administration advised me to offer the Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop intervention through this program. The Extras program classes are advertised in an online catalog format and are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Examples of offerings include crafting, dancing, culinary skills, sign language, and braille classes, as well as book clubs and various sport camps. I implemented the intervention by offering a 5-week afterschool workshop for sixth-grade girls on Mondays after school from 3:15 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in September and October 2021.

For the workshop materials, I used *The Resilience Workbook for Teens* by Cheryl Bradshaw (2020)—a resource designed for 12- to 18-year-old adolescents to help teens embrace themselves, bounce back from adversity, and achieve their full potential—as well as worksheets from Big Life Journal to enrich the lessons and collect as artifacts. I chose *The Resilience Workbook for Teens* because it addresses grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness to build different personality traits that have been shown to contribute to emotional and psychological resilience (Bradshaw, 2020). The workbook is organized into five modules labeled "goals," each targeting a general component for building resilience: (a) adapting to change, (b) overcoming adversity, (c) finding your strength, (d) keeping perspective, and (e) staying focused (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Intervention Workshops*

| Modules | Workbook activities | Collected artifacts [a] |
|---|---|---|
| Module 1: Adapting to Change | 1. Rewiring the Brain<br>2. Storytelling and Perspectives<br>3. Letting Go of Your Old Story | • Focus on Solutions |
| Module 2: Overcoming Adversity | 1. Understanding Stress<br>2. Grit and Growth Mindset<br>3. Direct Discomfort Versus Indirect Discomfort | • Lesson Learned |
| Module 3: Finding Your Strength | 1. Fear: Turn "What If" Into "I Can"<br>2. Vulnerability: Finding the Strength to Be Yourself<br>3. Assertive Defense of the Self | • I Am Strong Like a Tree |
| Module 4: Keeping Perspective | 1. Self-Care<br>2. Mindfulness<br>3. Values Chart: What Drives You? | • Challenging My Negative Thoughts<br>• I Am Grateful Because |
| Module 5: Staying Focused | 1. SMART Goals<br>2. Keeping the Inner Critic in Check | • My Goal Planner<br>• Goals |

[a] Blank handouts for the artifacts are in Appendix C.

The first chapter, "Adapting to Change," addresses rewiring the brain, storytelling and perspectives, and how to let go of your old story. Chapter 2, "Overcoming Adversity," addresses understanding stress, grit and growth mindset, distress tolerance, and direct discomfort versus indirect discomfort. Chapter 3, "Finding Your Strength," discusses fear and how to turn "what if" into "I can." It also provides an opportunity to

write a letter to oneself and addresses vulnerability, taking chances, and asserting defense of the self. Chapter 4, "Keeping Perspective," speaks to self-care, mindfulness, values (what drives you?), and letting go of perfectionism. The final chapter, "Staying Focused," introduces the reader to "SMART Goals," the "DOTS of Avoidance," and keeping the "inner critic" in check.

In order to foster trust and safety within the group, the physical space for the workshop was conducive to these needs. The space selected for the intervention was a large, empty practice room in the choral building. This room greatly decreased the chance of interruptions during the workshop. I arranged 17 desks in a circle and posted encouraging, character-building posters around the room. Due to the school's COVID-19 protocol at the time of the study, desks were not required to be distanced, but students were required to wear masks at all times.

## Participants

Participants were female sixth-grade students. I chose to work with sixth-grade students because at this school, sixth grade is the second year of middle school, so students are still adjusting to changing classes, managing multiple teachers and teaching styles, and heavier amounts of homework. I also chose to introduce tools for building resilience to sixth-grade students with the hope that they will have more time and opportunities to practice resilience before beginning high school. I decided to limit the group to females because of the studies cited in Chapter 1 (Liang et al., 2016; Lund & Dearing, 2013; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Lyman & Luthar, 2014) that suggest that adolescent female students might particularly benefit from this type of intervention. I

recruited for both treatment ($n$ = 16) and control ($n$ = 13) groups for a total of 29 participants.

**Treatment Participants**

My recruitment procedure for the Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop was approved by Oakwood Academy administration and began with advertising a brief description of the workshop in the school's Extras fall catalog, which is typically available to the school community at the beginning of August. The catalog description included a disclaimer (approved by administration) that all participants in the workshop had to agree to the study and have parent permission to take part in the study.

After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A), I sent an email to the parents of all female sixth-grade students outlining the purpose, goal, and description of the study the day before the registration website opened for enrollment. In this email, I outlined the participant requirements. Treatment participants were admitted to the workshop and the study on a first come, first served basis through the online Extras registration website. Initially, the workshop was capped at 15. However, the coordinator of the Extras program informed me that the registration had reached capacity while a parent was completing the registration form and submitting workbook payment (all Extras programs have supply fees). I allowed admission for the 16th participant because the website had permitted the parent to begin the registration process. The Supergirls workshop was filled within 2 hours of the website going live. When asked on the postsurvey, "Why did you sign up for this workshop?" five of the 13 treatment participants who completed the surveys answered, "My parent/guardian wanted me to," one participant answered, "I wanted to,"

and seven participants answered, “My parent/guardian and I both wanted to.” See Table 3 for demographic information for the participants.

**Table 3**

*Race/Ethnicity and Grade Point Average (GPA) Reported by Participants*

| Race/ethnicity and GPA | Control ($n$ = 13) | Treatment ($n$ = 13) [a] |
|---|---|---|
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 1 | 1 |
| Black/African American | 1 | 1 |
| Other (White/Filipino) | 1 | 0 |
| Prefer not to report | 1 | 2 |
| White | 9 | 7 |
| GPA | | |
| 4.0 | 7 | 7 |
| 3.6–3.9 | 4 | 4 |
| 3.0–3.5 | 2 | 0 |
| Not reported | 0 | 2 |

[a] $n$ = 16 for the treatment group; three treatment participants did not complete the presurvey.

**Control Participants**

The control group consisted of 13 sixth-grade girls enrolled at Oakwood Academy who either did not sign up for the workshop or who were not admitted to the treatment group due to the workshop reaching maximum enrollment. I recruited them by sending an email to all sixth-grade female students and their parents or guardians requesting permission to participate in the study. See Table 3 for control group demographic information. I did not cap participation in the control group; 13 students opted to participate in the control group study by taking a pre- and postsurvey.

## Role of the Researcher

For this action research study, my role as a researcher was that of a facilitator and researcher. In the role of a facilitator, I organized and led the weekly sessions of the Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop outlined in the intervention section of this chapter and collaborated with student participants through our group discussions. As the researcher, I documented, collected artifacts, and recorded memos after each session. I also collected the pre-intervention study data, which consisted of a presurvey with questions targeting perceived levels of resilience as well as why it may be important to develop resilience in middle school students. Finally, as the researcher, I conducted a post-intervention focus group and survey with the treatment participants and a postsurvey with the control group.

## Data Collection

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed method approach to collect data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In an explanatory sequential mixed method design, the researcher first collects quantitative data, then gathers qualitative data to help understand and explain the quantitative results.

### Quantitative Instrument

The quantitative instrument used in this action research study was a pre/postsurvey distributed via email to participants in both the control and the treatment groups. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) described quantitative strategies as "an inquiry approach useful for describing trends and explaining the relationship among variables found in the literature" (p. 627). Both the control participants ($n$ = 13) and 13 of the 16 treatment participants completed the pre/postsurvey.

In 2011, researchers Windle et al. (2011) conducted a methodological review of resilience measurement scales. They reviewed 19 resilience scales to evaluate the "psychometric rigour of resilience measurement scales developed for use in general and clinical populations" (Windle et al., 2011, p. 1). The results of this study indicated that while there is no optimal measure of resilience, overall, the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale in addition to the Resilience Scale for Adults and the Brief Resilience Scale received the top psychometric ratings. For the purposes of this study, I adapted the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 10 (CD-RISC 10), which is a modification of the original Connor-Davidson (2003) 25-item scale by Campbell-Sills and Stein (2007) to measure participants' perceptions of their ability to recover from stress with a pre- and post-intervention survey. The questions in the CD-RISC 10 survey "serve mainly as a measure of hardiness, with items corresponding to flexibility, sense of self-efficacy, ability to regulate emotion, optimism, and cognitive focus/maintaining attention under stress" (Davidson, 2018, pp. 5-6).

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the "Likert scale illustrates a scale with theoretically equal intervals among responses" (p. 165). I chose a Likert scale approach because by adolescence, most children have the self-awareness to be able to self-report different emotional states and behaviors and are usually able to respond to surveys as well as adults (Scott, 2008). The 10-question survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale measurement that included the following response options: 0 = *not true at all*, 1 = *rarely true*, 2 = *sometimes true*, 3 = *often true*, 4 = *true nearly all the time*. Sample questions included "Having to cope with stress makes me stronger," and "I am not easily discouraged by failure." See Appendix B for the pre/postsurvey instrument.

To preserve anonymity for the surveys, participants were provided with instructions to create an ID for the pre- and postsurvey composed of their third-grade teacher's last name, their favorite hobby, and the street number of their home address (e.g., McCarverbasketball12702).

## Qualitative Data Sources

> According to Plano Clark and Creswell (2015), in qualitative research
>
> the researcher studies a problem that calls for an exploration of a phenomenon; relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words . . . describes and analyzes words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective and reflexive manner. (p. 54)

I collected qualitative data on the treatment group only from the following sources: (a) one focus group, (b) in-process memos from weekly group discussions and the focus group, (c) workshop artifacts, and (d) open-ended questions on the survey. I discuss each in the following sections.

### *Focus Group*

Focus groups can be used to encourage participants to share their opinions, perceptions, and feelings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Focus group interviews also provide the researcher with an opportunity to explore the experiences and perceptions of different participants at one time. The data gleaned from these focus groups can be used to supplement other data from the study (Ivankova, 2015). I held a focus group interview following the last intervention workshop session. All 16 treatment participants were present and participated in the interview, which lasted approximately 85 minutes. I transcribed the focus group session using Otter.ai. The focus group questions for the present study were a modified combination of Duckworth's Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and Jefferies et al.'s (2019) Child & Youth Resilience Measure-Revised

scale. See Appendix D for the focus group questions. Questions 1–5 are from Duckworth's scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), and questions 6–10 are from Jefferies et al.'s (2019) scale. I started with the question "What was one of your favorite takeaways from the workshop?" with the aim to help the girls feel more comfortable before I asked more specific questions such as, "Do setbacks with friends discourage you? If so, how?"

### *Memos*

I typed the memos at the end of each of the five sessions and the focus group once participants were dismissed. These in-process memos (Emerson et al., 2011) included immediate reflections and key points from the sessions as well as a summary of the session. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) stated that "in memos, the researcher explores hunches, ideas, and thoughts, and then takes them apart, always searching for the broader explanations at work in the process" (p. 450). I typed an in-process memo immediately following the focus group at the end of the intervention.

### *Workshop Artifacts*

The artifacts collected during the intervention were worksheets completed by participants during the workshop sessions. Given (2008) defined an artifact as a "unique source of data that often are right in front of us. They shed light on important aspects of a person, society, or culture, enriching any study" (p. 26). Seven worksheets were taken from the Big Life Journal's *Growth Mindset Kit for Tweens and Teens* (Eidens, 2018) and can be found in Appendix C. A total of 112 worksheet artifacts were collected. Students also filled in sections in their personal workbooks that they may have chosen to use for discussions; however, I did not collect these due to their personal nature.

### *Open-Ended Survey Questions*

There were two open-response questions on the survey in order to gain more insight pre- and post-intervention:

1. What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the academic (classroom) setting? Why do you think they are so hard?
2. What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the peer-related (social) setting at school? Why do you think they are so hard?

## Analysis

### Quantitative

Survey question data were grouped into two categories: academic resilience and peer resilience. I calculated a gain score for each participant by subtracting the presurvey score from the postsurvey score and compared the treatment and control groups to determine if there was a positive increase in the treatment group. These calculations were analyzed with independent sample *t* tests in SPSS and did not show an increase between the groups. The survey question data were then analyzed using ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) tests to look again for an increase among the treatment group. The participants' postsurvey score was the dependent variable, the group number ("0" for control and "1" for treatment) was the fixed factor, and the participants' presurvey score was the covariate. The results of this test indicated that there was no increase in the treatment group's levels of perceived resilience in academic or peer-related settings compared with the control group. Descriptive analysis was also used to interpret the quantitative data collected.

## Qualitative

I analyzed all qualitative data sources using initial coding, in vivo coding, and magnitude coding in two cycles. According to Saldaña (2015), "In Vivo Coding uses words or phrases from the participant's own language in the data record as codes" (p. 294). I followed Harding's (2013) steps for coding, which include establishing initial categories based on transcript readings, coding the transcripts, reviewing the codes and making appropriate changes to the categories, and in each group, searching for trends and findings.

### *Cycle 1*

For my first cycle coding approach, I chose to use open, or initial, coding because I wanted to remain open to possibilities from the data I might not have anticipated (Saldaña, 2015). I began using MAXQDA software in the early stages of coding, but the majority of my qualitative data collected was handwritten and could not be interpreted by CAQDAS. I chose to code by hand in lieu of using software. I went through the worksheet artifacts the participants turned in and spread them on the floor. I looked for any commonalities in the participants' wording and labeled the commonalities I discovered using Post-its. I used orange for Academic Stressors, blue for Peer/Friend Stressors, pink for Support Systems, and yellow for Coping Strategies. After collecting the data from my intervention, reviewing the data, and finding commonalities, I began assigning codes. For example, if a student reported feeling dumb after receiving a bad grade, or feeling angry if she didn't receive a perfect score, I coded "feelings," "grades," and "didn't get perfect score." The further I went through the data, the more categories began to emerge. I utilized the transition technique titled "coding the codes" (Saldaña,

2015, p. 229) to explore the data. I had already begun to see possibilities of taking the line-by-line codes and lumping them together into larger units of data.

***Cycle 2***

For my second cycle, I used the transition of code mapping in order to group the different codes into categories. I also used in vivo coding for Cycle 2. Different feelings were one of the line-by-line codes that emerged during the first cycle, so I categorized the students' reported feelings under the category of "Feelings." Grades were another category that emerged, so I entered the codes that referenced grades as subcategories such as "bad grade," "fail," "tests," etc., under the category of "Academic Stressors." My subcodes came from the line-by-line coding of the documents, and my codes were a representation of Saldaña's (2015) coding the code technique. At the end of this process, I was able to "create categories of categories" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 278). I grouped the most prevalent codes into four main categories: Academic Stressors, Peer/Friend Stressors, Support Systems, and Coping Strategies. After closer examination, I dispersed the "Feelings" category among these main categories, as the students' feelings were in relation to one of the four categories.

Once the commonalities were discovered, I began the process of code landscaping and magnitude coding (Saldaña, 2015) by using creating *word clouds* to get a visual representation of the participants' language for each category. See Appendix E for word cloud representations of Academic Stressors, Peer Stressors, Coping Strategies, and Support Systems. These representations aided me in the development of themes.

## Validity and Reliability

In order to conduct the most valid and reliable study, first and foremost, the researcher must be credible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), "Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (p. 209). There are certain safeguards a qualitative researcher may put in place to increase credibility and reliability. For my study, I worked to increase credibility by providing as accurate and descriptive an account as possible, as well as searching for congruence between my findings and reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). As a researcher, one cannot ensure validity. Thus, "validity . . . is a goal rather than a product: it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 105, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 243). Triangulation is a strategy I practiced, by using a mixed methods approach and multiple qualitative methods to collect data. According to Sagor (2005), "Triangulation or combination of multiple data sources enhances the credibility of research findings, and results in developing more feasible and more reliable action plans" (p. 46). I triangulated the information obtained from the focus group, pre- and postsurveys, artifacts, and memos to support the validity of my study.

As stated earlier, I used the CD-RISC 10 (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007) for the pre/postsurvey to assess the ability of middle school females to bounce back from potential academic and peer-related challenges. The internal consistency of the scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha with the alpha value of .85 indicating good reliability (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007). According to Campbell-Sills and Stein (2007), "The 10-item CD-RISC captures the core features of resilience" (p. 1027).

# CHAPTER 4

# RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine and measure sixth-grade female students' perceived levels of resilience in academic and peer-related situations. Through pre- and postsurveys, a focus group, and a 5-week intervention, students reported on their resilience as well as academic and peer-related stressors and coping strategies and support systems to help them navigate these stressors. In what follows, I present the study findings by research question.

## Research Question 1

RQ1 was the following: How and to what extent does the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" increase sixth-grade middle school female students' perceived levels of resilience in academic situations?

RQ1 was answered using quantitative data findings related to the academic questions on the survey (questions 1–10; see Appendix B for the full survey). I ran a one-way ANCOVA to determine if there was any statistical significance between the control and treatment groups in perceived levels of academic resilience. According to the pre- and postsurveys from the treatment group, there were no significant improvements to perceived academic resilience after the innovation. There were no significant improvements to perceived academic resilience for the control group ($F = 3.06$, $p = .094$). See Table 4.

**Table 4**

*One-Way ANCOVA Academic Data*

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | *df* | Mean Square | *F* | Significance | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrected model | 1470.493[a] | 2 | 735.246 | 17.925 | <.001 | .609 |
| Intercept | 160.836 | 1 | 160.836 | 3.921 | .060 | .146 |
| Presurvey covariate | 1123.377 | 1 | 1123.377 | 27.388 | <.001 | .544 |
| Group fixed factor | 125.541 | 1 | 125.541 | 3.061 | .094 | .117 |
| Error | 943.392 | 23 | 41.017 | | | |
| Total | 15757.000 | 26 | | | | |
| Corrected total | 2413.885 | 25 | | | | |

[a]R Squared = .609 (Adjusted R Squared = .575)

However, looking at the descriptive statistics, slight increases were reported within the treatment group in the following areas: “tendency to bounce back after hardship” and “the ability to remain focused and think clearly under pressure.” The control group also reported slight increases in “ability to adapt to change,” “coping with stress can make me stronger,” “consider self a strong person when dealing with life’s challenges,” “ability to see the humorous side of things,” “belief in the ability to achieve goals,” and “ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger.” See Table 5 and Table 6 for the pre- and postsurvey mean scores and standard deviations for each question as well as the sums of the pre- and postsurvey total scores.

**Table 5**

*Treatment Group Pre- and Postsurvey Mean and Standard Deviation Scores: Academic Questions*

| Area | Survey questions | Presurvey | | Postsurvey | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Flexibility (Q 1, 5) | Ability to adapt to change | 3.45 | .66 | 3.08 | .73 |
| | Tendency to bounce back after illness or other hardships | 3.18 | .94 | 3.15 | .95 |
| Sense of self-efficacy (Q 2, 4, 9) | Ability to deal with whatever comes my way | 2.45 | 1.08 | 2.85 | .86 |
| | Coping with stress can make me stronger | 1.45 | .89 | 1.92 | 1.14 |
| | Consider self a strong person when dealing with life's challenges | 2.36 | 1.15 | 2.62 | .92 |
| Optimism (Q 3, 6, 8) | Ability to see the humorous side of things | 2.27 | 1.05 | 2.69 | 1.07 |
| | Belief in the ability to achieve goals | 3.18 | .72 | 2.69 | .91 |
| | Not easily discouraged by failure | 1.64 | 1.37 | 2.38 | .74 |
| Cognitive focus (Q 7) | Can remain focused and think clearly under pressure | 2.18 | 1.27 | 2.77 | 1.31 |
| Emotional regulation (Q 10) | Ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear and anger | 2.00 | .74 | 2.08 | 1.00 |
| Total Scores | | 24.16 | 9.87 | 26.23 | 9.63 |

*Note*. $n = 13$; three participants did not complete the pre/postsurveys.

**Table 6**

*Control Group Pre- and Postsurvey Mean and Standard Deviation Scores: Academic Questions*

| Area | Survey questions | Presurvey | | Postsurvey | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Flexibility (Q 1, 5) | Ability to adapt to change | 2.85 | 1.10 | 3.15 | 1.17 |
| | Tendency to bounce back after illness or other hardships | 2.62 | 1.33 | 3.00 | .88 |
| Sense of self-efficacy (Q 2, 4, 9) | Ability to deal with whatever comes my way | 2.62 | 1.08 | 2.46 | 1.28 |
| | Coping with stress can make me stronger | 1.23 | 1.31 | 2.00 | 1.36 |
| | Consider self a strong person when dealing with life's challenges | 2.77 | 1.12 | 2.85 | 1.35 |
| Optimism (Q 3, 6, 8) | Ability to see the humorous side of things | 2.62 | 1.33 | 2.85 | 1.17 |
| | Belief in the ability to achieve goals | 2.69 | 1.07 | 2.77 | .97 |
| | Not easily discouraged by failure | 2.54 | 1.34 | 2.38 | 1.27 |
| Cognitive focus (Q 7) | Can remain focused and think clearly under pressure | 2.38 | 1.44 | 2.69 | 1.14 |
| Emotional regulation (Q 10) | Ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger | 2.08 | 1.21 | 2.15 | 1.56 |
| Total Scores | | 24.4 | 12.33 | 26.3 | 12.15 |

*Note*. $n = 13$.

For both the control and the treatment groups, participants rated themselves lowest on a question designed to measure a sense of self-efficacy. For example, students in both groups averaged a 1.5 (*rarely true* and *sometimes true*) for the statement "Coping with stress (in academics) can make me stronger." The second lowest average score

among both groups addressed optimism. Students rated themselves on average a 2.0 (*sometimes true*) that they are not easily discouraged by failure (in the academic setting). The third lowest average score regarded emotional regulation. Students ranked themselves a 2.02 (*sometimes true*) on their ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger.

The question that treatment and control participants ranked themselves highest on in terms of perceived academic resilience was in response to flexibility and their ability to adapt to change. The average student score was a 3.17 (*often true*). The second highest score (also related to flexibility) was a 3.0 in response to perceived tendencies to bounce back after illness or other hardships. The third highest score (2.87) among students was in relation to optimism and their perceived belief in the ability to achieve goals. Overall, these findings show that most participants perceive themselves to be flexible and able to adapt to change in academic and peer situations. The findings also show self-efficacy to be a growth area for perceived resilience in students for both academic and peer situations.

### Research Question 2

RQ2 was the following: How and to what extent does the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" increase sixth-grade middle school female students' perceived levels of resilience in peer relationships at school?

This research question was answered using quantitative data findings related to the academic questions on the survey (questions 1–10; see Appendix B for the full survey). I ran a one-way ANCOVA to analyze quantitative data for RQ2 to determine if there was any statistical significance between the control and treatment groups in

perceived levels of peer-related resilience. According to the pre- and postsurveys from both the control and the treatment groups, there were no significant improvements to perceived resilience in peer relationships after the innovation ($F$ = .571, $p$ = .457). See Table 7.

**Table 7**

*One-Way ANCOVA Peer Data*

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | *df* | Mean Square | *F* | Significance | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrected model | 745.028[a] | 2 | 372.514 | 19.817 | <.001 | .633 |
| Intercept | 84.202 | 1 | 84.202 | 4.479 | .045 | .163 |
| Presurvey covariate | 744.874 | 1 | 744.874 | 39.625 | <.001 | .633 |
| Group fixed factor | 10.741 | 1 | 10.741 | .571 | .457 | .024 |
| Error | 432.356 | 23 | 18.798 | | | |
| Total | 18962.000 | 26 | | | | |
| Corrected total | 1177.385 | 25 | | | | |

[a]R Squared = .633 (Adjusted R Squared = .601)

However, looking at the descriptive data, slight increases were reported within the treatment group in the following areas: “ability to adapt to change,” “tendency to bounce back after hardship,” “considers self a strong person when dealing with life’s challenges,” and “ability to see the humorous side of things.” The control group reported slight increases in the following areas: “ability to adapt to change,” “ability to deal with whatever comes my way,” “coping with stress can make me stronger,” “consider self a

strong person when dealing with life's challenges," "ability to see the humorous side of things," "belief in the ability to achieve goals," and "ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger." See Table 8 and Table 9 for the pre- and postsurvey mean scores and standard deviation for each question as well as the sums of the pre- and postsurvey total scores.

**Table 8**

*Treatment Group Pre- and Postsurvey Mean and Standard Deviation Scores: Peer Questions*

| Area | Survey questions | Presurvey | | Postsurvey | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Flexibility (Q 1, 5) | Ability to adapt to change | 2.77 | 0.70 | 3.08 | 0.73 |
| | Tendency to bounce back after illness or other hardships | 2.85 | 0.95 | 3.15 | 0.95 |
| Sense of self-efficacy (Q 2, 4, 9) | Ability to deal with whatever comes my way | 2.92 | 1.00 | 2.85 | 0.86 |
| | Coping with stress can make me stronger | 2.00 | 0.78 | 1.92 | 1.14 |
| | Consider self a strong person when dealing with life's challenges | 2.54 | 0.93 | 2.62 | 0.92 |
| Optimism (Q 3, 6, 8) | Ability to see the humorous side of things | 2.08 | 0.83 | 2.69 | 1.07 |
| | Belief in the ability to achieve goals | 2.85 | 0.86 | 2.69 | 0.91 |
| | Not easily discouraged by failure | 2.46 | 1.01 | 2.38 | 0.74 |
| Cognitive focus (Q 7) | Can remain focused and think clearly under pressure | 2.77 | 1.19 | 2.77 | 1.31 |
| Emotional regulation (Q 10) | Ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger | 2.38 | 1.21 | 2.08 | 1.00 |
| Total Scores | | 25.62 | 9.46 | 26.23 | 9.63 |

*Note*. $n = 13$; three participants did not complete the pre/postsurveys.

**Table 9**

*Control Group Pre- and Postsurvey Mean and Standard Deviation Scores: Peer Questions*

| Area | Survey questions | Presurvey | | Postsurvey | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Flexibility (Q 1, 5) | Ability to adapt to change | 2.77 | 0.89 | 2.85 | 1.29 |
| | Tendency to bounce back after illness or other hardships | 2.77 | 0.97 | 2.69 | 1.20 |
| Sense of self-efficacy (Q 2, 4, 9) | Ability to deal with whatever comes my way | 2.54 | 0.84 | 2.69 | 1.07 |
| | Coping with stress can make me stronger | 1.62 | 1.15 | 2.15 | 1.23 |
| | Consider self a strong person when dealing with life's challenges | 2.69 | 1.14 | 3.00 | 1.24 |
| Optimism (Q 3, 6, 8) | Ability to see the humorous side of things | 2.85 | 1.23 | 3.00 | 0.96 |
| | Belief in the ability to achieve goals | 2.23 | 1.25 | 2.62 | 1.15 |
| | Not easily discouraged by failure | 2.15 | 1.41 | 2.15 | 1.29 |
| Cognitive focus (Q 7) | Can remain focused and think clearly under pressure | 2.38 | 1.33 | 2.54 | 1.28 |
| Emotional regulation (Q 10) | Ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger | 2.08 | 1.49 | 2.54 | 1.22 |
| Total Scores | | 24.08 | 11.7 | 26.23 | 11.93 |

*Note*. $n = 13$.

For both the control and the treatment groups, participants rated themselves lowest on a question designed to measure a sense of self-efficacy. For example, students in both groups averaged a 1.92 (*sometimes true*) for the statement regarding self-efficacy, "coping with stress (in peer settings) can make me stronger." Interestingly, this was also

the lowest score recorded by participants regarding academic resilience. The second lowest score for peer-related resilience was a 2.27 (*sometimes true*) for "ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger," which relates to emotional regulation. The third lowest average score regarded optimism and was in reference to "not easily discouraged by failure." Participants rated themselves a 2.28 (*sometimes true*) on this statement. Interestingly, the three lowest-ranking statements by all participants in both academic and peer-related resilience were in reference to the following statements: (a) "coping with stress can make me stronger," (b) "not easily discouraged by failure," and (c) "ability to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger."

The question that treatment and control participants ranked themselves highest on in terms of perceived peer-related resilience was in response to flexibility. The highest average scores were tied at 2.86 for "ability to adapt to change" and "tendency to bounce back after illness or other hardships." Participants' third highest average score was related to self-efficacy. Participants rated themselves an average of 2.75 on "ability to deal with whatever comes my way" in relation to peer-related resilience. The participants' highest scores for peer-related resilience were very similar to their highest scores for academic resilience. For both academic and peer-related resilience, participants rated themselves highest in areas of flexibility.

### Research Question 3

RQ3 was the following: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students describe stressors that they experience in peer and academic settings?

As mentioned in Chapter 3, in the analysis of the qualitative data sources I grouped codes into four categories: (a) academic stressors, (b) peer/friend-related

stressors, (c) support systems, and (d) coping strategies. For RQ3, I addressed the first two categories, academic and peer-related stressors. My initial qualitative data were collected from the presurveys submitted by the control and treatment groups. Participants answered two open-response questions: (a) What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the academic (classroom) setting? Why do you think they are so hard? and (b) What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the peer-related (social) setting at school? Why do you think they are so hard? Additional qualitative data for RQ3 were collected from the post-intervention focus group.

**Academic Stressors**

Students reported a number of academic stressors, and all participants reported at least one academic stressor. One of the most common stressors reported was related to grades. “Bad grades” were stressors for participants. Many participants appeared to hold themselves to high standards, and they said they compare themselves with their peers regarding grades they receive. When discussing high standards, students from the treatment and control reported statements on the surveys including, “When I get bad grades it is hard on me because then I feel like I can’t achieve anything,” “I’ve always been really hard on myself with grades,” and “After I feel like I’m doing well in school and then I get a bad grade, it just ruins my day.” Other students reported that grades can make them feel ashamed, sad, and even afraid. Students reported, “Some of the harder things to bounce back from is a bad or failing grade because it makes you feel ashamed,” “Sometimes I study so hard and then when I don’t get an A, I feel sad,” and “When I get a bad grade, I am scared to disappoint my parents.” Students continued to report that bad

grades are an academic stressor for them, stating, “I think getting a bad grade is hard for me because it makes me feel like I don’t know what I am doing,” “I always get stressed about bad grades, even if I know they aren’t really bad,” “when you don’t get the grade you hoped for on a test because you studied hard and it didn’t pay off.” Some students were worried about how their grades would affect their future.

Students also reported comparing themselves with their peers. Students from the treatment and control groups reported statements on the survey such as “When I get a bad score on my test and everyone, even kids who aren’t smart, get a better grade than me.” Another participant wrote,

> When all of your friends barely try doing their work or do their work really fast and get everything right, but when I do the work I get a lot of stuff wrong even though I worked hard and tried my best. It really brings down my spirits and makes me feel sad.

Students also reported comparison with other peers when “getting the lowest grade in the class.”

During the post-intervention focus group, I asked the treatment group if setbacks with grades or school discourage them. Almost every hand in the room went up to respond to this question. Again, the most common academic stressor reported regarded grades. In response to this question, one participant labeled herself a perfectionist: “I’m usually a big-time perfectionist, so even if I get a nine out of ten on something, or have a 98 in the class, I’m still not that happy.” Another participant chimed in with,

> If you get a bad grade, you tell yourself that you won’t be able to get it back up in time for report cards because it is the middle of the quarter. It makes me feel like, stuck and depressed, like you just feel like going into a rabbit hole and not coming out.

I called on a participant to respond next. She said, “It definitely discourages you if you study hard and then don’t get the grade you expected.” Another participant quickly echoed with, “Yeah, if you study really hard and thought you were totally prepared and then you just make silly mistakes on everything. It makes you feel like you actually don’t know the material.” One participant then added,

> If you just had this really hard test but all of your friends are like, oh, it’s so easy, and all your friends get a 100 on it, and you get a really bad grade. You don’t want to tell them your grade, so you just say you got a 100 and that the test was easy.

An additional participant raised her hand and responded,

> So, if you usually have a 100 but then you get a really bad grade on some homework or something like that, then you have a bad grade, like a C, and your parents get mad at you and you get grounded. Like, that would make you sad.

Every semester at Oakwood Academy, the President’s List (all As) and Honor Roll (all As and Bs) are emailed to all parents and students in grades 5–12. These lists are also pushed out on social media. Another participant talked about how it is hard because you feel “dumb” if you are not on the President’s List. She responded with this scenario:

> Okay, let’s say your name is Judith, and you are usually at the top of the President’s List. And you get really good grades and you’re like, the G.O.A.T. [greatest of all time] and everything. And let’s say that your bestie, Sally Bob, takes a math test and gets a 42 and you said, oh, that was the easiest thing ever, but really you got a 42 as well. Now she feels discouraged because she thinks that you did better than her, but you really didn’t.

Another common academic stressor that students reported is related to the workload for sixth grade. Students feel overwhelmed if they miss a few days and have to catch up on the work. Students reported statements including, “Going on vacation because I know when I get back I will have so much work to do,” “It is hard to bounce back after being absent for a long time, because after that I will have a lot of makeup

work," and "missing a few days when you are sick because you miss work and have to make up for it." Students also reported that multiple tests within the same week are a stressor and that the workload is hard to do due to their busy schedules. Reported stressors included, "when I get too much homework because then it makes it feel like all day is school, even in the evening," "There is just a lot of work in middle school and it's hard to do it all with my busy schedule," and "when most of my classes are giving a test in the same week." During the post-intervention focus group, a participant mentioned,

> In elementary school, you're like, I have no homework. And then you get to fifth and sixth grade and you're like, "Why do I have so much homework?" And then you go home and you have a friend who goes to another school who says, "Come on, let's go do something," and I'm like, I can't. I have homework.

Additionally, students reported academic stressors related to being called on in class or getting "yelled at" by the teacher. Some students feel embarrassed when the teacher calls on them. One participant reported,

> It is hard being called on if I was doing something that I wasn't supposed to do or if I don't know the question. It is really hard for me because I tend to be really hard on myself whenever that happens. And then, since I am really hard on myself, I get really ashamed and embarrassed about it. What's even worse is that I tend to think back on these things, sometimes months after it happened.

Another student said,

> When you get called on for doing something bad in front of everyone, even though you didn't do it, but the teacher thought you did. I think this is hard because you don't know how to say nicely that you didn't do it.

Another participant wrote, "When a teacher calls on me and I fumble through the words even though I know the answer." Participants also reported, "When the teacher calls on me to answer a question that I don't know, I get very awkward and think about it multiple times, even if it has been a week or later from when it happened," and "when you have to answer a question in front of the whole class, but it is wrong and people start to laugh and

snicker. It makes you kind of mad." Some students reported that their teachers "yell" at them. Statements included, "when the teacher yells," "getting yelled at by a teacher," and "when a teacher yells at you because it scares you." In summary, these sixth-grade participants appear to experience stress related to academic situations, which may affect their sense of resilience.

**Peer Stressors**

Out of the 26 control and treatment participants who took the survey, only three reported not experiencing any peer-related stressors. One responded with, "I don't ever get too stressed about peer-related situations." The second reported, "I don't really have these problems," and the third reported, "I usually don't have any troubles at school with friends." For the others, the most common peer-related stressor reported on the survey by both the control and the treatment groups was feeling left out by friends and peers. Other common stressors included, but were not limited to, being laughed at or teased by other peers, mean peers or bullies, feeling ignored by peers, and disagreements and shifts in friendships. The quotations that follow were reported in the survey findings. One participant reported,

> I think that being left out is really hard for me because I tend to think that I did something wrong or that people don't like. It's probably just a personal thing that two friends want to talk about, but since I don't know, I feel really sad and start to wonder if I was mean to them.

Another participant reported, "It is hard when someone leaves you out of a group project. When this happens, I feel like nobody wants to be around me and nobody likes me." Another wrote, "I don't like it when I get left out of something. This happens to me a lot," and "sometimes my friends leave me alone on the football field and I feel left out." Many participants reported feeling left out from a sleepover or playdate that happened

and then they heard about it at school. One participant reported that "they probably had fun without me." Another participant did not feel like coming back to school after experiencing feeling left out. She wrote,

> I think when you're being left out, you don't feel like coming back to school. It brings you down and makes you feel like you don't belong in that friend group. It also starts to disturb you in class and you even start crying sometimes.

Other participants reported feeling left out "hurts my feelings because I know they are having fun without me," when "I don't get invited to something," and "when peers tell inside jokes."

Some of the participants had experienced being laughed at by peers and friends. One participant wrote, "When I get a question wrong in class, they laugh at me," and another wrote, "When I get laughed at it is hard for me because I tend to overthink some things, so I think that they don't like me, or I did something wrong, so then I start to doubt myself." Other participants reported, "It's hard to bounce back after a person I feel close to makes fun of me," and "sometimes people joke about me."

Some participants had experienced bullying and "mean people" in the school setting. During the focus group, one participant reported, "It is hard to bounce back from bullies who say mean things to you and to other people." Similarly, a participant wrote:

> It is hard to bounce back when people start to tease you about stupid things for no reason at all. It is hard for me because sometimes I feel insecure about my body and when they make those rude comments, it breaks me down even more.

In the survey, a student reported that "it is hard when a popular person is rude to you all the time. I don't want to say anything about it because I am scared that those people who like her won't like me anymore." Many reported that peers talking about them behind

their backs is hard to bounce back from: “Sometimes people talk about you as if you weren’t right there listening. It makes you feel bad about yourself.”

Many students feel ignored or neglected by their peers: “It is hard when my friend just leaves me for someone else . . . because I feel like I always need someone to be with me to help me.” Other students reported, “Sometimes my friends ignore me and it makes me feel like I don’t have anyone to talk to,” “Sometimes they decide they don’t like you and it is hard to avoid them because you see them in the hall and have classes with them,” and “When my friend sits at a different lunch table without telling me, it makes me feel neglected.”

Some participants said they had experienced shifting friendships and disagreements with peers and friends. Participants reported it is hard “when friends yell at each other,” “when friends ‘ghost’ you,” and when “friends ditch you for no reason for new friends.” Another participant reported, “It is hard when you get put in the middle of friends who are fighting and you feel like you have to pick sides. It makes me worry that I will lose friends no matter what I do.” Another participant said she “got called the ‘unoriginal,’” or the copy of a friend.

During the post-intervention focus group, I asked the treatment group three questions regarding peer relationships: (a) “Do setbacks with peers or friends at school discourage you?” (b) “Do you feel like your interests in your peer relationships change from year to year?” (c) “Do you consider yourself to be a hard worker when it comes to your relationships with peers?” Participants were less participatory with these questions in comparison with discussing academic discouragements. Some students responded that setbacks with peers do not discourage them, while others discussed situations that could

be discouraging. A participant shared, “If someone makes fun of me in front of me, it makes me feel really sad even though I try to ignore them.” Another participant said,

> Sometimes setbacks discourage me because if you are really close to that friend and then they kind of say something bad about you, like behind your back, it just really hurts your feelings because you’ve known that person for so long.

Another participant quickly echoed that statement: “Like she said, if you know that person for a long time and like, you wouldn’t think that they would do something like that to you.”

When participants were asked if they feel their interests in peer relationships change from year to year, most of them responded with “not until fifth and sixth grade.” Many of the participants in this study had been in school together since Pre-K–3 and had kept a lot of the same friendships. Participants did report that a number of new students come to Oakwood Academy from local public elementary schools during the fifth and sixth grades, but that overall, the change is good because “you can meet and make new friends.” A participant stated, “I feel like it didn’t really change much until sixth grade, and I feel like sixth grade is changing a lot. There are so many new girls.” That was not true for another participant, who said, “Not really for me. I’ve kind of had the same friends since, like kindergarten, but there have been a bunch of new people in the school this year, and I feel like it changed it positively.”

When asked if participants consider themselves to be a hard worker when it comes to relationships with peers, there were a lot of nods in the room. One of the more talkative participants started the discussion, saying, “I feel like I don’t really work very hard because I just ask a friend if they want to come over and they just show up. Like, I don’t feel like that’s working very hard.” Her peer followed with,

> So, I feel like I work hard for schoolwork and stuff like that, but when it comes to friends, I feel like I shouldn't have to work hard. Because if they want to be my friend, they should just like me just the way I am and not for me to have to work to be their friend.

Another participant said,

> I work hard. I will work hard to try making everyone happy, and just try to be like, nice to everyone and not be rude. But like, if you're working for friends and not making them, make some kinds of drawings or try changing yourself to be nice.

In summary, these sixth-grade participants appeared to experience a range of stressors related to peer-related situations, which may affect their sense of resilience.

## Research Question 4

RQ4 was the following: How and to what extent do sixth-grade middle school female students exhibit and discuss resilience during the "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop"?

Analyzing treatment participants' written work during the intervention workshops, I found places where participants were able to identify ways where they would exhibit resilience as well as identify people in their life who provide support. Participants also wrote about hobbies or practices that help them cope when academic and peer stressors come their way.

### Support Systems and Coping Strategies

During the workshop, participants were able to ponder and discuss personal support systems and coping strategies. When treatment group participants were asked to consider support systems they could depend on to help navigate academic and peer-related stressors, each participant was able to list one or more people or activities that can help them in times of stress. These data were collected from the treatment group artifacts,

as the intervention encouraged students to consider sources of support and coping strategies. The worksheet "I Am Strong Like a Tree" (see Appendix C) asked students to list stressors on the tree and then list what keeps them from blowing over (support and coping systems) as the roots of the tree. Support systems reported included friends, family, mothers, pets, aunts, sisters, fathers, grandmothers, teachers, coaches, and therapists. Coping strategies reported by students included meditation, "riding my bike," spending time outdoors, reading, drawing, listening to music, talking to someone, and "chilling out."

**Exhibiting Resilience**

There were instances in the workshops when the treatment participants exhibited resilience evidenced through the worksheet artifacts that I collected each week. By completing the worksheets (Appendix C), students were able to practice skills and ways of thinking that foster resilience. Throughout the workshop, participants engaged in exercises that included grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness exercises. I taught mindfulness exercises from the Bradshaw (2020) text. For example, when completing a reflection on challenging negative thoughts, most participants wrote about reframing negative thoughts by changing participants' narratives using the growth mindset and grit strategies discussed during the workshop (see Table 10 for participants' responses to two of the questions on the worksheet; see Appendix C for the worksheet). An exception was Participant J, who did not reframe her statement to the extent of the other participants.

**Table 10**

*Participants' Responses to the "Challenging My Negative Thoughts" Worksheet*

| Participants | A negative thought I have | What is a more helpful and realistic thought? |
|---|---|---|
| Participant A | I am dumb. | I can try harder to be smart. |
| Participant B | I won't finish my schoolwork on time. | If I work really hard to finish it tonight, it will be done. |
| Participant C | I am bad at cheer. | I'm not as good as everyone else right now, but I can get better. |
| Participant D | I'm going to get a horrible grade on my test. | Believe in yourself and try. Work smarter, not harder. |
| Participant E | I'm not as pretty as the other girls. | I am beautiful just the way I am. |
| Participant F | I am a terrible singer. | I can keep practicing. |
| Participant G | My grades are bad. | If I get organized with a homework folder, I can get better. |
| Participant H | I'm afraid I won't make the volleyball team. | I made it last year and I have been practicing. |
| Participant I | I don't have any friends. | I can make new friends. |
| Participant J | I don't like my life. | Life can be hard sometimes. |

Other worksheets focused on action steps for achieving goals. The book used for the intervention (Bradshaw, 2020) included "S.M.A.R.T. Goals" (S- specific, M- measurable, A- attainable, R- relevant, and T- timely) (pp. 108–109). The worksheet "My Goal Planner" (Appendix C) prompted students to identify a goal with a specific start date and deadline, list why the participant wanted to complete this goal, people who could help the participant reach this goal, and action steps to achieve the goal. For

example, one participant's goal was to improve her math skills. Her support people listed included her dad, uncle, and grandmother. Her action steps included "talk to the math teacher, study for one hour a day with a break, practice and pre-check with my math teacher, get mom to learn what you are learning, and try to get a 100 on the test." Another student reported a goal of wanting to be better at basketball so she could help her team get better and win more games. She wrote that people who could help her reach this goal were her sister, mom, and coach. Her action steps included "go outside and dribble a ball, ask my mom to pass the ball to me, start doing more private coaching sessions, and play basketball during recess."

The "Focus on Solutions, Not Problems" worksheet (Appendix C) asked participants to identify a problem they are struggling with, estimate the size of the problem, brainstorm solutions for the problem, choose which solution to try first, and identify a person who could help or advise them with the problem. One participant listed "my friends leaving me out" as her problem. On a scale of 1–10 with 1 being "tiny, I can let it go," and 10 being "huge, life changing," she rated the problem a 5. Her solutions to her problem were to "talk to them a little bit more, hang out with them, and talk to them about it." She selected "talk to them about it" as the solution she could try first and that her parents could help or advise her with this problem.

Another participant listed the problem she was struggling with as "any time I have lower than an A I get mad." She rated her problem a 4 in size and listed the following solutions: "work to get my grade up, ask more questions, get extra help." She chose to "ask more questions" as the solution to try first and identified her parents, friends, and teachers as people who could help or advise her with her problem. One participant listed

self-confidence as a problem she was struggling with and rated it a 7 on the scale. Her solutions included “doing stress relieving things like reading and drawing, trying things outside of my comfort zone, and talking to friends.” She planned to try “doing stress relieving things” as her first solution and listed her mom as someone who could help or advise her with this problem.

The “Lesson Learned” worksheet (Appendix C) addressed how learning from our mistakes and failures coincides with growth and evolution. Participants were instructed to think about how, after making a mistake, they could step back, find out what could be learned from this, and think about what to do next. Participants then listed something that did not go their way, what they learned from it, and what they could have done differently. One participant reported,

> I studied really hard and didn’t get the grade I wanted. I learned that I am in sixth grade and I am going to make mistakes, and even if I do, it is a learning process. Maybe I should try studying different things because you never know what is going to be on the test.

A second participant wrote,

> I was at the beach with my friend and it seemed like she was texting my best friend the entire time. I learned that I needed to tell her how I felt and calmed down instead of worrying my mom by constantly texting her about it.

A third participant wrote about her friend leaving her alone during physical education class. She noted that she learned “to try and be more outgoing” and that “she should have told her friend how she felt.” Another participant wrote that she did not get first chair in All-Region Band. She learned that “I have to work harder,” and that next time she can “work harder on practicing the music.”

During the post-intervention focus group, participants were asked, “What was your favorite or most helpful part of the workshop?” The first participant to respond

reflected on a skit we did during the workshop addressing assertive, not aggressive, defense of the self. Instead of attacking the person back (aggressive defense), participants had the opportunity to practice examples of focusing on their own strengths and worth in order to defend themselves assertively after a rude or mean comment (Bradshaw, 2020). The students took turns reading the skit, with one student playing the person making rude comments and the other student playing the person practicing assertive defense. This was a favorite of many participants because they said it helped them learn to end the cycle of rude comments being exchanged by staying out of the conflict, but still reinforcing their own intentions and strengths. Treatment participants participated in a number of discussions and activities on grit during the intervention, including ways to challenge old/negative thought patterns and narratives in order to continue working toward a goal.

According to Bradshaw (2020), words known as "qualifiers" (p. 33) can help stretch the brain from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. The girls said they enjoyed learning about "qualifiers" such as "yet, often, maybe, right now," and "sometimes" to replace the words "always" and "never." They took turns practicing changing their own always and never statements such as "I always do bad on my math tests" to "Sometimes I do bad on my math tests," and "I haven't done well on my math tests yet." Another participant said she found the "spiral thought" activity really helpful. The spiral thought activity involved learning about direct discomfort (when a person experiences thoughts or emotions directly related to a certain event) versus indirect discomfort (when the original event leads to partially related thoughts that are not currently happening). For example, a student had an argument with a friend and feels sad (direct discomfort), versus a student had an argument with a friend and feels sad, then thinks maybe none of her friends like

her, which adds feelings of rejection and loneliness (Bradshaw, 2020, pp. 41–43). The participant said,

> If you have a fight with a friend, it's like, easy to feel like no one likes you, even though that isn't true. It makes you remember another time a friend got mad at you and then you just feel misunderstood. That one fight with a friend can make you feel like the whole world turned against you if you don't learn to stop thinking beyond the actual situation you are dealing with. I really liked learning about that.

Another participant talked about how she found listing action steps to achieve her goals helpful (see Appendix C for the worksheet titled "My Goal Planner"), while another participant shared that she learned how to "unstick" a thought and change her narrative. For example, participants wrote in their workbooks about a "stuck thought" they have, such as "I'm bad at cheer." Participants then practiced rewriting the statement using a qualifier and the word "but." The initial statement became "I'm sometimes bad at cheer, but if I keep practicing maybe I can get better." These are all examples of grit and growth mindset in practice.

A final favorite takeaway that participants mentioned was related to mindfulness. One student said she found the breathing exercises we practiced really helpful before she took her English test. Participants learned a breathing technique where you "draw" a square with your finger. For the top line, participants breathed in for four counts; for the side line, they held their breath for four counts; for the bottom line, they exhaled for four counts; and then they held their breath for the final side to complete the square. The participant said it helped her take her mind off of feeling nervous by focusing on just one thing. Another student reported in the post-intervention focus group, "Mindfulness can be helpful if you just got a bad grade. Instead of worrying about what your parents are going to say, you can stop and just focus on one thing." Treatment participants practiced

mindfulness through activities and exercises such as breathing techniques, practicing emotion regulation, listing and discussing personal goals and values, and gratitude. Mindfulness relates to resilience in this context because it can help combat worry by keeping the mind in the present moment instead of in the past or future, which can help keep the brain focused under pressure or during adverse circumstances.

In summary, the sixth-grade treatment participants had a number of opportunities during the intervention to practice coping skills and strategies that may positively influence their personal sense of resilience. They were able to identify ways that they could exhibit resilience when faced with academic and peer stressors.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore sixth-grade female students' perceived levels of resilience in academic and peer-related settings and implement an intervention designed to equip students who face stressors with tools and strategies including grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness. The 5-week intervention was titled "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop." Looking across the quantitative and qualitative results, the findings reveal strong commonalities—both before and after the intervention—between treatment and control participants regarding perceived resilience levels in academic and peer settings. Although there were not statistically significant increases in their perceived levels of resilience, descriptive analysis for both academic and peer resilience showed slight increases across the treatment and control groups, particularly in the area(s) of flexibility, optimism, and cognitive focus related to scores on the statements including "ability to adapt to change," "tendency to bounce back after hardship," "ability to see the humorous side of things," and "can remain focused and think clearly under pressure."

The qualitative data findings showed that participants (treatment and control) are challenged with academic stressors—with the most commonly reported including grades and comparison with peers academically. The findings also showed the most common peer-related stressor was feeling left out by peers. Examining treatment participants' work and discussion during the workshop highlighted the challenges that participants face along with their ideas to cope and problem solve to better navigate academic and peer situations. Many participants stated the following as ways they can bounce back from setbacks: "work harder," "keep trying," "don't give up," and "ask for help." While

this may not be a measured change, the treatment group appeared to have benefited from the opportunity during the 5-week workshop to explore current peer and academic challenges and learn about healthy ways to cope and ask for the support they need.

The artifacts and discussions during the intervention suggested potential benefits for the treatment participants. These potential benefits included participants identifying goals and discussing action steps necessary to achieve their personal goals. At least two of the artifacts collected asked participants to list people or things in their lives that help them feel supported when challenging experiences come their way. This exercise served as a potential benefit for participants to encourage them to seek support when needed.

Participants were able to give examples of their favorite or most helpful takeaways from the workshop without having to look back at the book and remind themselves of what we discussed. Not only were they able to answer with their favorite parts of the workshop, but some participants noted that they had already put exercises into practice when faced with academic or peer-related stressors. Students seemed visibly excited about what they had learned and were eager to share it with the group.

In what follows, I discuss the results of the study in relation to the theories and literature that helped to frame the study. I then discuss the limitations of the study and implications for research and practice. I conclude with the lessons I have learned throughout this project.

## Discussion in Relation to Theory and Prior Research

The results of this study are connected to research on resilience theory, grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness.

## Resilience Theory

According to Zimmerman (2013), "Resiliency theory focuses attention on positive contextual, social, and individual variables that interfere with or disrupt developmental trajectories from risk to problem behaviors, mental distress, and poor health outcomes" (p. 1). This study identified factors that may contribute to potential risks (stressors) for sixth-grade females. These factors included many participants feeling left out, comparing themselves with each other, struggles with perfectionism regarding grades, and high expectations for themselves and from their parents. The "Sixth Grade Supergirls Workshop" utilized grit, growth mindset, and mindfulness as the positive variables Zimmerman (2013) referred to in order to provide treatment participants with practices to help them navigate potential setbacks in academic and peer-related situations.

Smith et al. (2008) stated that resilience can be described as the ability to bounce back from stressful events or situations. Participants in this study reported stressors experienced in academic and peer settings, and the intervention provided skill sets to help participants feel more competent to exhibit resilience. Rutter (2006) argued that resilience requires competence as well as adversity. This intervention was designed to introduce and improve non-cognitive skills (competence) in relation to stressors (adversity) in order to improve perceived levels of resilience. The participants in this study had experienced adversities, and the intervention was designed to foster resilience by improving participants' competency to bounce back from the adversities reported. Participants discussed and defined resilience in the contexts of academic and peer settings along with brainstorming examples of resilience in these settings. For example, one treatment participant during the first week of the intervention described an example of practicing

resilience by going to sit at a different table and make a new friend if her current friend did not save her a seat.

**Grit**

This intervention taught treatment participants the concept of grit developed by Duckworth et al. (2007). The term is defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 1087). Treatment participants completed exercises designed to identify personal goals and create action steps and timelines to help them achieve the specific goals. The intervention taught participants that success does not have to be related to talent or IQ, but can be achieved by working hard and continuing to pursue a short- or long-term goal. Participants learned about SMART goals (Bradshaw, 2020) and how to set goals that are "**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**imely" (pp. 108–109, emphasis original) and applied this exercise in their intervention workbooks. Additional exercises used to teach and practice grit conducted in the workshop may be found in Appendix C with the titles "Goal" and "My Goal Planner." Participants were able to practice grit by applying it to their personal goals. One treatment participant shared during the intervention that she has been working on mastering her "cheerleading tuck" for over a year and she is still working on it. Another treatment participant shared with the group that she has been trying to get her math grade up since the beginning of the year and has started to practice more at home to achieve her goal and get an A in the class.

**Growth Mindset**

Another protective factor or process to promote resilience is the practice of growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). According to the authors, "fixed" mindsets

contribute to both academic underachievement and the impact of peer-related challenges, both of which were reported by participants in this study. Dweck and Yeager's (2012) research showed that students' mindsets can be changed, which can help them become more resilient. The intervention used growth mindset to help participants understand that their abilities to learn and grow are not fixed, but can be changed by the way they frame their thoughts and the amount of effort put into a certain activity (Bradshaw, 2020). Treatment participants practiced growth mindset by challenging negative thoughts. For example, one worksheet asked participants to write a negative thought they have about themselves, write what someone who loves them may say about the thought, and finally write a more helpful and realistic thought (see also Table 10 in Chapter 4). Most participants were able to reframe the negative thoughts into a more malleable, positive thought.

**Mindfulness**

Kabat-Zinn (2003) described mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment" (p. 145). According to Cortazar and Calvete (2019), the practice of mindfulness can also potentially improve people's levels of resilience and can help people respond to adversity and stress in more flexible ways, helping them to cope with difficulties and hardships more efficiently (see also Epstein & Krasner, 2013; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Wang & Kong, 2019). Mindfulness practices were taught in Week 4 of the intervention and included focuses on breathing, touch, sight, sound, and smell. Treatment participants reported in the focus group that when they practiced the breathing exercises (a mindfulness practice) taught in the intervention

before a test, they felt less anxious and calmer. Yuan (2021) emphasized that one of the most critical elements of resilience is accepting the present moment with a peaceful mind. This statement aligns with what a treatment participant reported when she practiced the breathing exercises before her test. She reported feeling less nervous and better able to focus. According to Bradshaw (2020), slowing your mind down and focusing on the present moment can take your mind off of past or future thoughts or worries. Bradshaw (2020) stated, "If you can stay in the moment, you can often stay much more focused, even under pressure" (p. 90), which is tied to Question 7 of the pre- and postsurvey statement: "I can remain focused and think clearly under pressure." There was a slight increase in the mean for this question from the pre- to postsurveys.

## Limitations

There were four limitations concerning the results of this study. A first limitation concerned the small participant sample and the fact that the treatment group sample was limited to after-school availability for the intervention. Thus, findings from the study may not reflect other sixth-grade girls at the school and are not generalizable to larger contexts. Quantitative data were collected from 13 control group participants and 13 treatment participants for a total of 26 participants. Qualitative data were collected from 13 control group participants and 16 treatment participants for a total of 29 participants. However, the sixth-grade class at Oakwood Academy has 34 females enrolled, so even if all female students had been able to participate, the sample would still have been small.

A second limitation to the study related to the registration for the intervention. The registration process for the intervention was conducted on a first come, first serve basis through the school's Extras website. As a result, participants were not randomly

assigned to the treatment and control groups and the registration process limited the treatment group sample from directly reflecting the diversity ratio within the grade.

A third potential limitation concerned the time of the year the surveys were distributed and the intervention was conducted. Presurveys were distributed and collected during the fourth week of school, and the intervention began in September. It is possible that at the beginning of a new school year, students may feel less capable of navigating setbacks. With only 6 weeks between the pre- and postsurveys, the short timespan may have caused the results to be so similar among both the control and the treatment groups pre- and postsurvey. It also may be challenging to measure meaningful change related to academic and peer-related resilience over a 5-week time span, and future work should examine longer time periods.

A fourth limitation of this study is that I did not explicitly ask treatment participants in the focus group or on the postsurvey if they felt the intervention improved their levels of resilience regarding academic and peer situations. If I were to extend this study, I would include a question such as that both on the treatment participant postsurvey and in the post-intervention focus group.

## Implications for Practice and Research

Despite these limitations, the results suggest several implications for practice and action research. Longer, or perhaps ongoing, interventions designed to increase perceived levels of resilience for adolescent females are needed in order to create meaningful, sustainable change. If I were to conduct this intervention again, I would offer it as a full-semester workshop or for the entire academic year. In addition, I would like to ask the treatment participants their opinions regarding areas for improvement or changes in the

workshop materials as well as ask them what they would like to learn more about. I would also explore the possibility of using a different text for the intervention. I found *The Resilience Workbook for Teens* (Bradshaw, 2020) text to be a bit mature for the sixth-grade (ranging from 11 to 12 years old) participants, even though the author stated in the introduction that she has done these exercises with people anywhere between the ages of 12 to 70.

Additionally, the intervention did not address resilience pertaining to social media. If I were to extend this study, I would incorporate a question in the presurvey asking participants whether they use social media and to specify which platform(s). For future research, I believe this to be a critical component to include. Many of the participants reported feelings of being left out and comparing themselves with others. Social media may be a contributing factor to these feelings. Interventions should be designed to include how to navigate setbacks from social media.

As a parent and educator, I think it would be helpful to design materials for parents of students who participate in the workshops that would have them expand or reflect upon what is being taught and discussed in the workshop. These materials would provide parents or caregivers the opportunity to come alongside students to further resilience practices and discussions within the home. For example, a weekly email could be sent with a few discussion prompts or exercises to do together at home. In addition to designing materials for parents, it may be beneficial to offer a professional development session for faculty members presenting the findings of this study along with ways to incorporate growth mindset into the curriculum to foster resilience among students.

In addition to incorporating research regarding social media usage as mentioned, a final implication is the need for longitudinal studies on female adolescent resilience in peer and academic settings. At Oakwood Academy, enrollment retention is high, which offers a great opportunity for longitudinal studies. Students could begin participating in resilience interventions as early as kindergarten and continue through their senior year or at least through eighth grade, which is the last year of middle school. These interventions could possibly set them up for success in academic and peer-related settings they may encounter in high school and in the future.

## Personal Lessons Learned

I have a passion to move the needle for students to better prepare them for success beyond the classroom in an ever-changing world. When I began this journey in 2019, all I wanted to do was start my own school and flip the approach to traditional education upside down. Through my doctoral work, I have learned that change is slow. I have seen a number of social-emotional learning initiatives fail because they are imposed on educators and take extra time outside of class for both teachers and students. I watch my daughter cram for her tests by memorizing facts and figures off of flashcards, and I question how much of this information she will actually retain in a month or in a year. Does she really need to know the viscosity of different types of fluids to succeed in the long term? I watch her suffer test anxiety and lose sleep because she does not want to get a bad grade. Many of the schools in our country have become so driven by academic achievement and helping students get in to the "top colleges." I am concerned for the well-being of our students. I feel increasingly discouraged but also passionate about helping schools find a balance.

Lessons I have learned throughout this action research study include that change can begin with one person and that there is power in small wins (Weick, 1984). I learned that some sixth-grade females struggle with more stressors than I anticipated when I began this study. The study has taught me to be more aware of the stressors students are facing both academically and related to peers when I am teaching in the classroom. I would imagine it is challenging to sit down with an open mind, ready to learn, while facing some of the stressors reported in this study. For me as an educator, this new knowledge will influence the way I relate and engage with my students during our class time. For example, I intend to incorporate a check-in at the beginning of each class to see how each student's day is going. I can ask them to show me with their thumbs (thumbs up, thumbs to the side, or thumbs down) to get an idea of the overall morale in the classroom each day.

When I began this study, I was familiar with the practices of grit and growth mindset and regularly incorporated them in my personal and professional practices. While I was aware of the concept of mindfulness, I had not personally practiced mindfulness until this intervention. Through the intervention, I learned and experienced the benefits of practicing mindfulness in stressful moments. For example, closing my eyes and focusing only on the sounds I hear before an important meeting, or taking a moment between classes to practice mindful breathing have helped me feel calmer and more prepared for the next step of the day.

## Conclusion

This work is ongoing. Equipping our students with the necessary tools to exhibit resilience in and outside the classroom cannot be accomplished with one 5-week

intervention. Just like so many other skills, if you do not use or apply the information on a regular basis, you are not likely to retain it. My hope is that this action research study will be repeated and refined regularly in the middle school of Oakwood Academy to empower students to practice resilience in academic and peer settings at school as well as into their future.

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# APPENDIX A

# IRB APPROVAL LETTER

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

APPROVAL: EXPEDITED REVIEW

Lauren Harris
Division of Teacher Preparation - West Campus
480/965-6692
Lauren.Harris.1@asu.edu

Dear Lauren Harris:

On 6/4/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

| | |
|---|---|
| Type of Review: | Initial Study |
| Title: | Refining Resilience: Grit, Growth Mindset, and Mindfulness in Adolescent Females |
| Investigator: | Lauren Harris |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00014042 |
| Category of review: | (6) Voice, video, digital, or image recordings<br>(7)(a) Behavioral research |
| Funding: | None |
| Grant Title: | None |
| Grant ID: | None |
| Documents Reviewed: | • Control_ Written Child Assent Form.pdf, Category: Consent Form;<br>• Focus Group Protocol.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• Katherine Dudley, Category: IRB Protocol;<br>• Letter of Permission.pdf, Category: Other;<br>• Parent Permission Google Form.pdf, Category: Consent Form;<br>• Parental Letter of Permission for Control Group.pdf, Category: Consent Form;<br>• Parental Letter of Permission for Participants.pdf, Category: Consent Form;<br>• PostSurvey Control.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• PostSurvey Treatment.pdf, Category: Measures |

| | |
|---|---|
| | (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• PreSurvey Control.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• PreSurvey Treatment.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• Recruitment for Email and School Catalog.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials;<br>• Survey Links.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);<br>• Weekly Reflection Prompts.pdf, Category: Participant materials (specific directions for them);<br>• Workshop Series Outline (2).pdf, Category: Resource list;<br>• Written Child Assent Form Ages 11-14.pdf, Category: Consent Form; |

The IRB approved the protocol from 6/4/2021 to 6/3/2022 inclusive. Three weeks before 6/3/2022 you are to submit a completed Continuing Review application and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 6/3/2022 approval of this protocol expires on that date. When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the "Documents" tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Katherine Dudley
Katherine Dudley

# APPENDIX B

# PRE- AND POSTSURVEY

Instructions:

1. Please click on the link in this email to begin the survey. Approximate survey time is 20 minutes, but you may take as much time as you need to complete it.
2. Before starting the survey, please sign in with the combination of the last name of your third-grade teacher, your favorite hobby, and the street number of your address (ex. McCarverTennis24650). This will be your user ID.
3. Please respond to the multiple-choice questions by selecting from the following: 0- *not true at all*, 1- *rarely true*, 2- *sometimes true*, 3-*often true*, 4-*true nearly all the time.*
4. Please respond to the open response questions using your own words.
5. Click "submit."

Adapted CD-RISC-10 Questions

Likert Scale Survey Questions

(*not true at all*=0; *rarely true*=1; *sometimes true*=2; *often true*=3; *true nearly all the time*=4)

Please rate yourself on the following in relation to academic/classroom settings:

1. I am able to adapt when changes occur. For example, having a long-term substitute teacher, or a schedule change.
2. I can deal with whatever comes my way. For example, a teacher asks me a question I don't know the answer to, or I get my name called for talking in class.

3. I try to see the humorous side of things when I am faced with problems in the classroom or with my teacher.
4. Having to cope with stress can make me stronger. For example, I can handle it if I receive a bad grade on a test or quiz.
5. I tend to bounce back after illness, injury or other hardships in the classroom. For example, if I miss a number of classes due to illness or travel, I feel confident I can catch up on the work I missed.
6. I believe I can achieve my goals in the classroom and with my teachers, even if there are obstacles. For example, I may not get along very well with my teacher, but I can still give my best, or I may not feel confident with what we are learning in class, but I can find the courage to ask for help.
7. Under pressure, I stay focused and think clearly. For example, if I'm feeling nervous about taking a test or quiz, I believe I can still focus and perform my best.
8. I am not easily discouraged by failure in the classroom. For example, if I studied for a test and did not do as well as I would have liked, I believe I can try to do better next time.
9. I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties in the classroom.
10. I am able to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger in the classroom. For example, if I get a test back and realize my score is one of the lowest in the class, I believe I can recover from whatever I am feeling.

Please rate yourself on the following in relation to peer/friend settings:

1. I am able to adapt when changes occur (in my friendships or social settings).

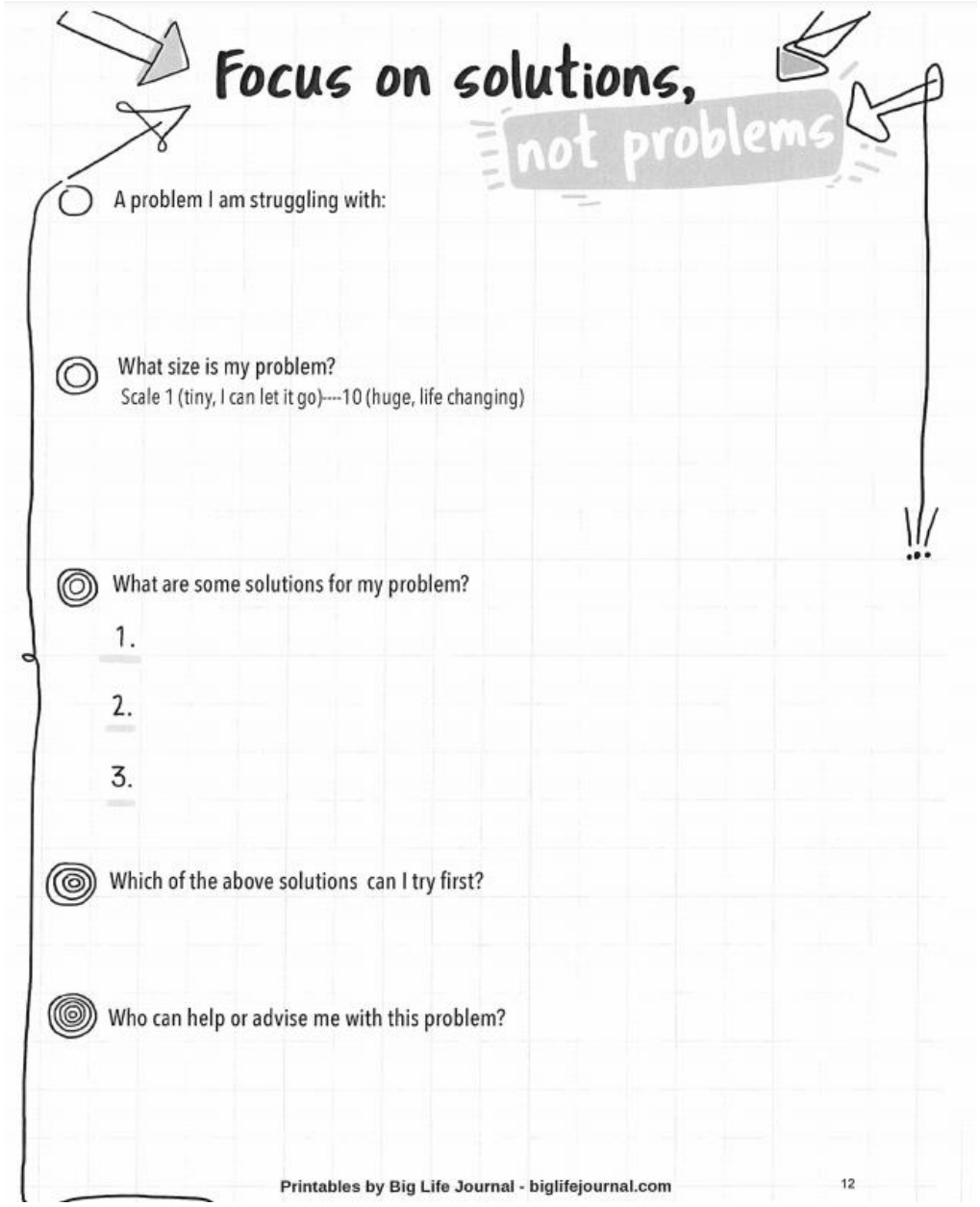
2. I can deal with whatever comes my way (with friends or classmates).
3. I try to see the humorous side of things when I am faced with problems (involving my friends or classmates).
4. Having to cope with stress (related to my friendships and classmates) can make me stronger.
5. I tend to bounce back after illness, injury or other hardships (with my friends or classmates). For example, a disagreement with a friend or classmate, or feeling left out.
6. I believe I can achieve my (friendship) goals, even if there are obstacles. For example, I can find the courage to introduce myself and make new friends.
7. Under pressure (with my friends and classmates), I stay focused and think clearly. For example, I am able to stand up for a friend or classmate if I believe they are being treated unfairly.
8. I am not easily discouraged by failure (in my friendships or relationships with classmates). For example, if my friend and I have a disagreement, I believe I can do my part to help fix it.
9. I think of myself as a strong person when dealing with life's challenges and difficulties in my friendships and relationships with classmates.
10. I am able to handle unpleasant or painful feelings like sadness, fear, and anger. For example, if a friend or classmate teases me, leaves me out, or doesn't save a seat or me in the lunch room.

Open-ended Survey Questions

1. What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the academic (classroom) setting? Why do you think they are so hard?
2. What do you feel are some of the harder things to bounce back from in the peer-related (social) setting at school? Why do you think they are so hard?

# APPENDIX C

## WORKSHEETS FOR INTERVENTION SESSIONS


Focus on solutions,
not problems
A problem I am struggling with:
What size is my problem?
Scale 1 (tiny, I can let it go)---10 (huge, life changing)
What are some solutions for my problem?
1.
2.
3.
Which of the above solutions can I try first?
Who can help or advise me with this problem?
Printables by Big Life Journal - biglifejournal.com
12

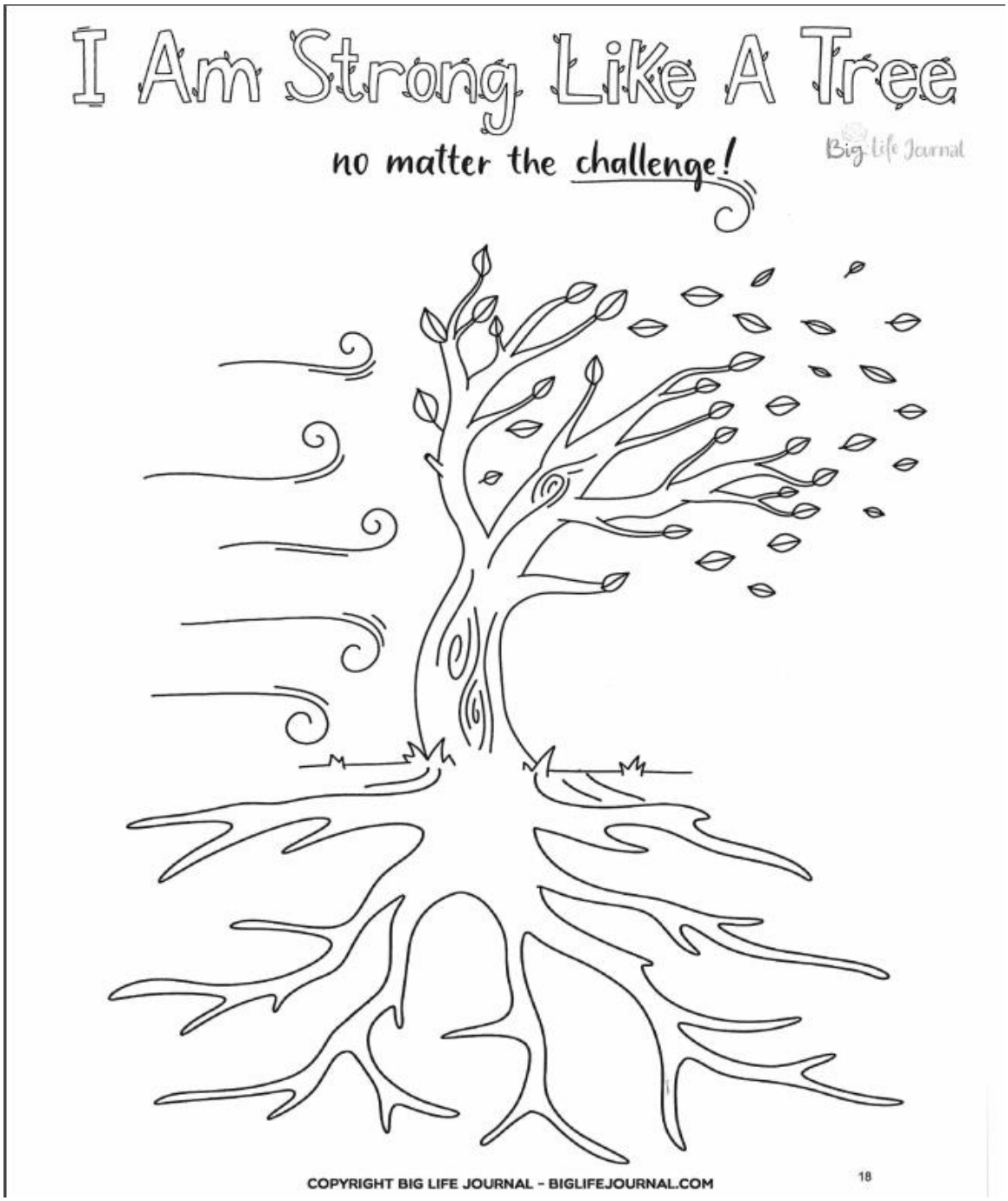
# Lesson Learned

Learning from our mistakes and failures coincide with growth and evolution.
After we make a mistake, it's important to step back, find what we can learn from this and think about what to do next.

Think of something which didn't go your way. Briefly describe what happened.

What have you learned from it?

What could you have done differently?




For this exercise, students write in the challenges they may be facing as the "winds" and the support systems and/or people who may ground and secure them as the "roots."

# CHALLENGING MY NEGATIVE thoughts

A negative thought I have:

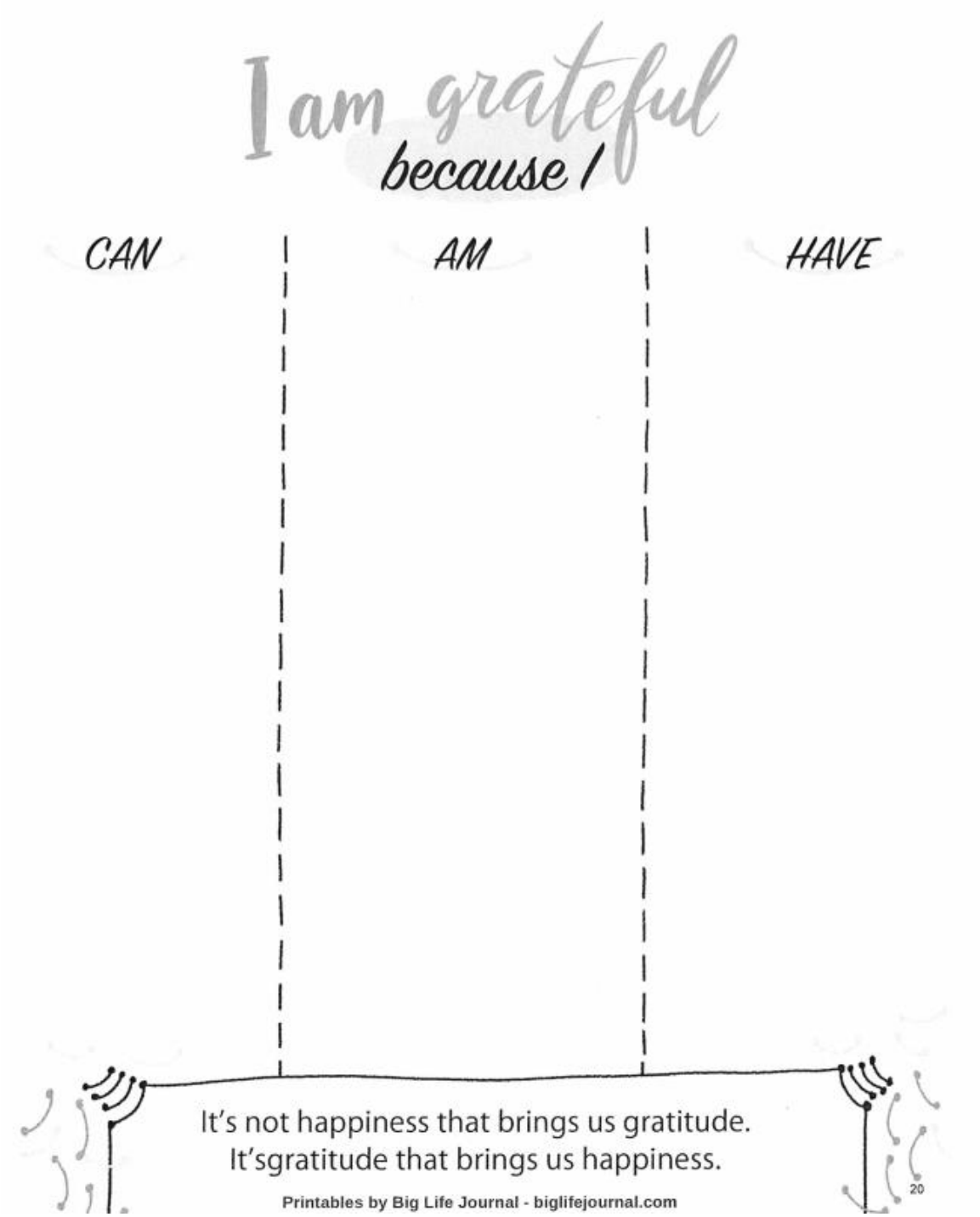
Can I be 100% sure this is true? YES NO MAYBE

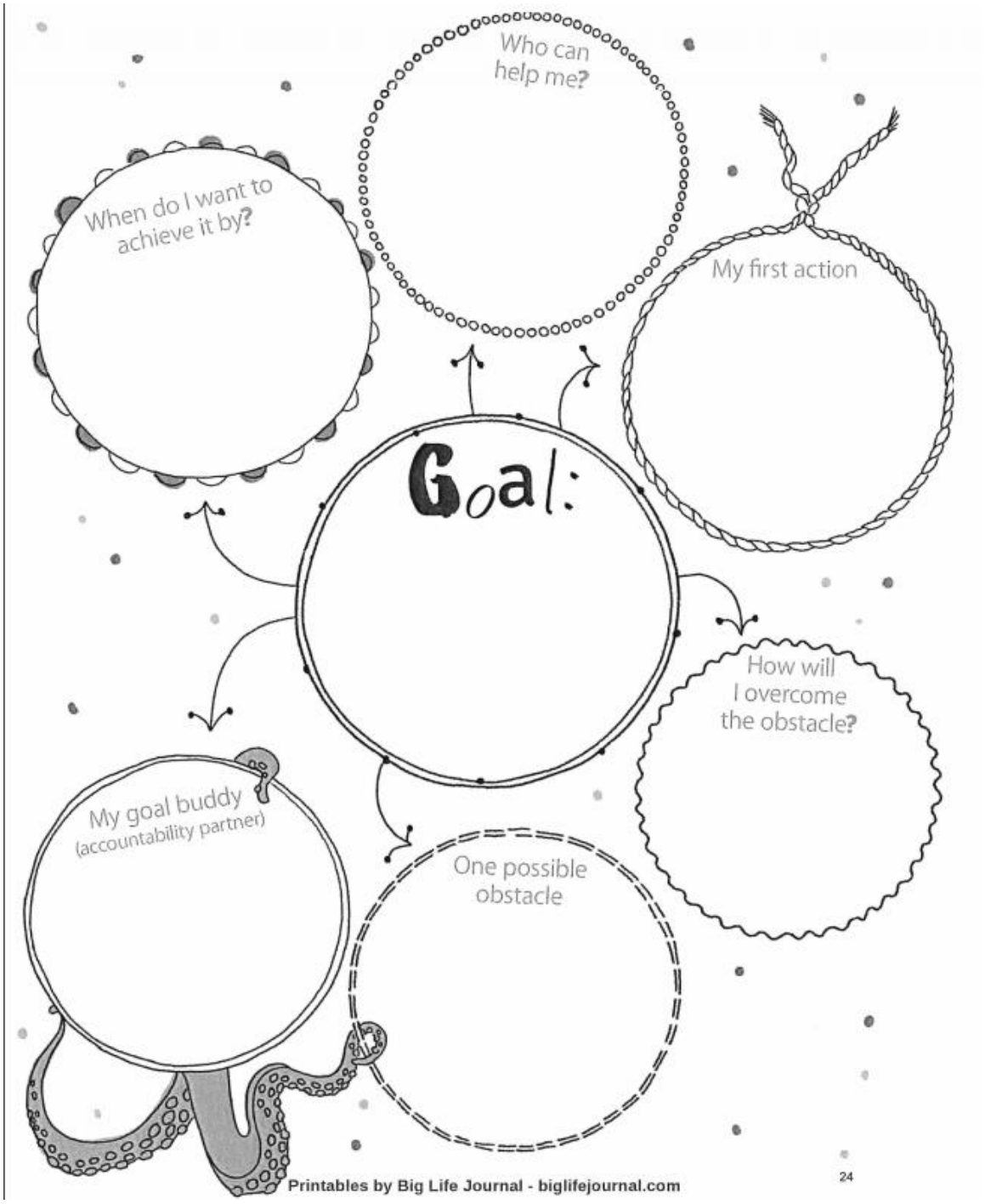
What would someone who loves me say?:

If my good friend had this thought, what would I tell them?

What is a more helpful and realistic thought?




I am grateful
because I
CAN
AM
HAVE
It's not happiness that brings us gratitude.
It'sgratitude that brings us happiness.
Printables by Big Life Journal - biglifejournal.com
20


Who can help me?
When do I want to achieve it by?
My first action
Goal:
How will I overcome the obstacle?
My goal buddy (accountability partner)
One possible obstacle
Printables by Big Life Journal - biglifejournal.com
24


My GOAL Planner
GOAL
Start
Deadline
Why I want to reach this goal:
People who could help me to reach this goal:
My action steps
biglifejournal.com
25

# APPENDIX D

## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Warm Up Question: What are some of your favorite takeaways from our workshop?

1. Do setbacks with friends discourage you? If so, how?
2. Do setbacks with grades or school discourage you? If so how?
3. Do you feel your interests in peer relationships change from year to year?
4. Do you feel your interests in academics change from year to year?
5. Do you consider yourself to be a hard worker when it comes to relationships with peers?
6. Do you consider yourself to be a hard worker when it comes to grades and school?
7. Are you driven to succeed? If so, in what regard(s)?
8. Do you typically get along with people around you? Do you tend to solve problems better in group situations or as an individual?
9. Do you feel like your parent(s)/caregiver(s) really look out for you related to peer situations?
10. Do you feel like your parents(s)/caregiver(s) really look out for you related to academic situations?
11. Do you feel supported by your friends?
12. Do you feel a sense of belonging at school?

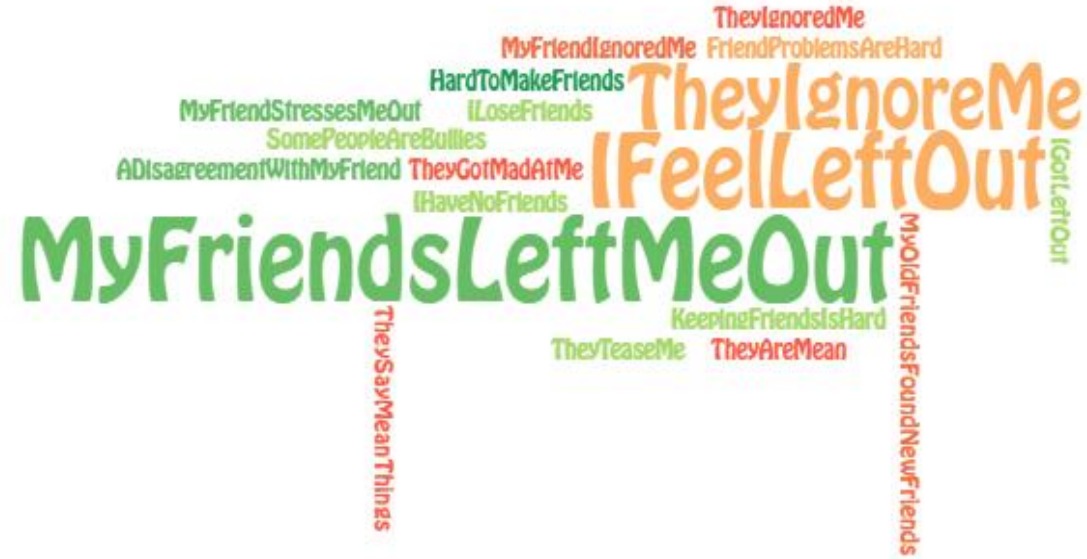
# APPENDIX E

# WORD CLOUDS

These word clouds were created using wordclouds.com.

Academic Stressors:


Peer Stressors:



Coping Strategies:


Support Systems: