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STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Running head: STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS AT RISK OF DROPPING OUT

Character Strengths of Students At Risk of
Dropping Out of High School

by

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology
at Antioch University New England, 2014

Keene, New Hampshire



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The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF STUDENTS AT RISK
OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL**

presented on July 24, 2014

by

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my mother, whose support and love has been invaluable.

Acknowledgements

I would not be here if it was not for the support and love of my family and friends. My mother is incredible and has been beyond patient with me, and I want her to know that I am forever grateful. I also want to thank my friend Andrea. Her support went above and beyond anyone could have ever asked for, and I couldn't have done this without her. I also want to thank my friend Steve. He has always been there, supported me and made me laugh when I needed it.

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to determine the participants' perceptions about what strengths at-risk students who follow through and graduate from high school have, using the conceptual framework of positive psychology, and its classification system of virtues and character strengths. To reveal the strengths of these students, this study used a qualitative methodology, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). In addition, the participants were asked to fill out a Likert scale survey to rate how frequently at-risk students who graduated employed each of the 24 VIA characteristics. The purpose of this study was to add to the under-researched area of identifying the strengths and not the weaknesses of those students at risk of dropping out but made it to graduation. This study should also raise awareness in the field of positive psychology, suggesting that the strengths of this population differ from the general adolescent population.

Keywords: *positive psychology, character strengths, virtues, at-risk students, at-risk adolescents, high school dropouts, high school graduates*

Introduction and Literature Review

Statement of the Problem

High schools continue to struggle with student retention. Children who drop out face both social and individual consequences. Over the past 40 years, research has focused on the factors that put children at risk for dropping out. However, it is only within the last 15 years that any attention has been paid to what keeps “at-risk” students in school. In addition, there are very few studies that touch upon the strengths of the at-risk individuals who remained in school through graduation. More specifically, after searching literature databases, no studies were found that used the conceptual framework of positive psychology and its classification system of virtues and character strengths as a way to determine whether at-risk students who graduate have specific identifiable strengths.

This paper begins by reviewing the multiple risk factors that previous research has identified for high school dropouts, providing an overview of positive psychology, and outlining characteristics identified as “virtues” and “character strengths” within the field of positive psychology that may be helpful in understanding why some at-risk students remain in school (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This is followed by a description of a study designed to see whether there were common strengths among those students, from the perspective of their guidance counselors and high school teachers, who were considered at risk of dropping out but made it through high school and graduated. This was accomplished by using a qualitative methodology, interpretive phenomenological analysis, and a Likert scale survey. The counselors and teachers were asked to discuss the strengths of high school graduates with at least two of the following list of risk factors: low academic competence, poor school socialization, general deviance, deviant affiliation, or low household socioeconomic status (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000;

Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006). This study adds to the under-researched literature of what strengths are associated with an at-risk student staying in school and graduating from high school. In the future, this knowledge may help us provide a new, more effective way to approach high school dropout prevention planning.

Background of the problem

The United States Census Bureau (2012) reported that in 1980, the high school dropout rate for students between the ages of 16 to 24 was an alarming 12 percent. By 2005, the national dropout rate of 16 to 24 year olds dropped to 7.9 percent, or 3.6 million students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The most recent information indicated that the proportion of 16 to 24 year olds who dropped out in 2009 remained high, at 7.0 percent. This percentage translates to almost 3.2 million people. It is important to note that although there was a decrease in the percent of dropouts, data continue to give a glimpse into the severity of a national problem; the reality remains that millions of high school students drop out each year.

Studies have shown that people who do not complete high school often face the world at a considerable disadvantage. Tidwell (1988) found that the overwhelming majority of both men and women who dropped out of high school insisted that later in life a diploma was crucial for them to gain employment. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than graduates (Rumberger, 1987; Tidwell, 1988; U.S. Department of Labor, 2010; Zvoch, 2006), and make up a significantly disproportionate number of inmates in prison (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Even though youth with antisocial problems are more likely to drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006), Tidwell posited that the opposite

could also be true. Since dropouts have a higher likelihood of being unemployed and do not have school activities to keep them occupied, they have more “idle time” which makes them “more likely to engage in antisocial behavior” (Tidwell, 1988, p. 941). Tidwell suggests that this could help account for the high percentage of high school dropouts in jail.

In addition, several studies have shown that high school dropouts have poorer academic skills than those who graduate (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Newcomb et al., 2002; Tidwell, 1988), which may contribute to dropouts being at higher risk to be unemployed and have lower paying jobs (Rumberger, 1987). Having lower academic skills does not just have an effect in the short term; a deficit in these skills can also prevent advancement in the long term by creating an impediment to gaining further schooling or training necessary to increase an employee’s performance level, or to remain competitive when looking for a job (Rumberger, 1987). In 2010, the Department of Education reported that people who did not graduate from high school [either with a high school diploma or a General Education Development (GED) certificate] earned approximately \$19,000 a year less than high school graduates. This not only negatively affects the individual, but also society. On average, dropouts earn a lower income than graduates. This difference in earnings is called “forgone income.” For society, forgone income then becomes “forgone government revenue.” This means that the government collects less tax revenue from the public, which they could use for programs or put back into the economy. For example, one study cited that cumulatively, people who dropped out of the national class of 1981 earned \$228 billion less in income than if they had graduated. This equated to over \$68 billion in forgone government revenue (Rumberger, 1987). Because recent studies show that dropouts earn \$19,000 per year less than those who graduate, there continues to be a significant amount of forgone government revenue today. Simultaneously, while there is a loss of government revenue,

there is a drain on the economy, because those with lower incomes are more likely to need financial aid through programs such as welfare and unemployment assistance (Rumberger, 1987; Tidwell, 1988; Zvoch, 2006). Of course, there is a need to fill lower salaried jobs, but dropouts also are more likely to be in poorer mental and physical health (Rumberger, 1987). Despite the obvious distress poor mental and physical health pose for the individual, they also affect society by increasing the need for social services, such as state and federally run medical assistance (Rumberger, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Clearly, not graduating from high school is associated with negative financial and mental health outcomes for the individual and this affects everyone. Since the dropout rate remains as high as it does, more, or perhaps something different, needs to be done to help support those who can be identified as at risk for dropping out of high school.

Predictors

Over the years, several risk factors have been identified to help predict who is most likely to drop out of high school. Risk factors are defined as “biological or psychosocial hazards that increase the likelihood of a negative developmental outcome” (Werner, 1990, p. 97). There are several risk factors that seem to recur among dropouts. For the purposes of this study, the negative developmental outcome for at-risk adolescents is dropping out of school. The risk factors for dropping out that seemed to be most consistently statistically significant include: low academic competence, poor school socialization, general deviance, deviant affiliation, and low household socioeconomic status (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006).

The most reliable and “potent” factor that predicts whether youth are likely to drop out or not is their level of academic competence (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006).

Academic competence was mostly measured by a combination of the student’s grade point average and their achievement test scores (Battin-Pearson et al, 2000; Newcomb et al, 2002).

Both Battin-Pearson et al. and Newcomb et al., who summarized a number of studies, found academic competence to be the most important and strongest predictor of dropping out.

Academic competence also “partially mediate[d] the effects of general deviance, bonding to antisocial peers, gender and socioeconomics...and fully mediate[d] the effects of bonding to school, poor family socialization, sexual involvement, [and] ethnicity” (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000, p. 597). Other related factors that influenced a student’s decision to dropout were if they had “lower expectations for academic achievement,” (Newcomb et al., 2002, p. 173) whether or not they could keep up with their schoolwork, and how satisfied they were with school (Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Also, positive school socialization and a commitment to succeed in school were found to increase the likelihood of academic achievement, making the student less likely to drop out.

School socialization refers to how the child assimilates into the school, for example, whether the student bonds with the school, as demonstrated by their joining athletic teams or extracurricular groups. The lower the bonding, the less invested the child is with the school and the more likely he is to leave (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007; Worrell & Hale, 2001). In addition, students who do not identify with their school often feel alienated.

Alienation includes feelings of “rootlessness, hopelessness, and estrangement.” Dropouts often

reported feeling alienated from both their school and home environments (Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Another factor associated with dropping out is the age of the student. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), of those who dropped out between October 2007 and October 2008, 2.2 percent were 16 years old; 5.0 percent were 17 years old; 7.8 percent were 18 years old; 9.9 percent were 19 years old, and 9.5 percent were 20 to 24 years old. The national data indicated 8.0 percent of 16 to 24 year olds dropped out during the same time period, and students aged 19 to 24 years old had a higher dropout rate than the national average. These statistics did not control for predictive factors (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), however, the statistics do show that those who were beyond typical high school age were most likely to drop out.

After a student's academic competence, "general deviance" and socioeconomic status (SES) held the most power to predict whether a student would drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006). General deviance refers to a person engaging in "deviant behavior." In published dropout studies, deviant behavior generally referred to discipline problems and delinquency; however it occasionally included someone who was sexually active, using drugs, or smoking. Both sexual activity and tobacco use were noted to be predictors of poor academic competence, and tobacco use was a precursor to high school failure (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Newcomb et al., 2002).

General deviance, deviant affiliation (which refers to making friends with antisocial individuals), and low SES "all directly increased the likelihood of dropping out of school, regardless of academic achievement at age 14" (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000, p. 597).

Nevertheless, none of these factors could individually predict dropout. And the fact remains that the more negative factors students have in their lives, such as deviant behaviors, deviant affiliations and low SES, the more likely they are to drop out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

As previously stated, low household SES is one of the three top predictors of high school failure (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Zvoch, 2006). However, the reach of low socioeconomic status is not limited to just the home. High school dropout rates are also higher among poverty stricken communities and schools (Zvoch, 2006). Also, low SES falls under the umbrella of “structural strain influences,” which also include gender and ethnicity. All three of these factors can help determine whether a student is at risk, but neither gender nor ethnicity alone is a predictor of dropping out. For example, a trend was seen where girls dropped out less often than boys (Newcomb et al., 2002). It is possible that this outcome is related to boys generally having lower academic competence and greater general deviance (Newcomb et al., 2002; Rumberger, 1987). “All ethnic and gender differences in high school failure were mediated by deviance and academic ability or accounted for by family SES discrepancies” (Newcomb et al., 2002, p. 172). Conversely, teenage pregnancy (considered “general deviance”) is a predictor of, and is linked to higher female dropout rates (Battin-Pearson, 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Zvoch, 2006). Studies found that the effects of ethnicity, like gender, are not dispersed equally among dropouts, and “deviance and academic competence fully mediated the association of gender and ethnicity with high school failure” (Newcomb et al., 2002, p.183).

Even though academic competence has the highest association with dropping out, studies show that “youth who experienced a single risk factor in early adolescence had moderately increased levels of school dropout, whereas youth with a combination of two or more risk factors

had significantly higher dropout rates” (Suh & Suh, 2007, p. 297). Similarly, Newcomb et al. (2002) found no evidence that one factor could singularly account for a student dropping out. Their findings suggest that a student is at a much higher risk of dropping out if two or more risk factors are present.

Across the country, millions of students need help to prevent them from leaving school before graduating. As stated earlier, dropouts are often at a disadvantage in several ways compared to graduates, and can create a strain on society. Previous studies have identified several factors that categorize students as at risk for dropping out, and prevention programs have been put in place accordingly. However, more needs to be done, as these programs are clearly not reaching everyone in need.

Positive Psychology

One way that high school dropouts have yet to be looked at in depth is through the perspective of positive psychology. Positive psychology differs from much of contemporary psychology as it focuses on mental health, not mental illness. Modern psychology customarily focuses on treating parts of the psyche that are disordered and need to be repaired which is generally done within a disease framework. Positive psychology looks at psychology in terms of “strength and virtue,” and not just in terms of “pathology, weakness and damage” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). It does not ignore people’s problems, but works instead by prioritizing working with an individual’s positive traits to improve one’s well-being and achieve mental health (Huebner, Gilman, & Furlong, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

At the core of positive psychology is “the notion of good [or virtuous] character” (Seligman, 2002, p. 125). To study positive psychology as a scientifically sound way to look at human functioning, researchers needed to classify and measure the core assumption of what

“good character” is. To accomplish this, Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson and their team embarked on the Values in Action (VIA) project (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2002). The team read approximately two hundred major religious and philosophical writings from around the world, spanning over the past 3000 years. Authors and books ranged from Aristotle to Benjamin Franklin, from the Koran to the manual of the Boys Scouts of America (Seligman, 2002). This produced the VIA Classification of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The classification system identified six universal virtues and 24 character strengths. The six virtues are: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These six virtues, “taken together...capture the notion of good character” (Seligman, 2002, p. 133). However, the virtues alone were deemed too vague to describe what good character is; more detail was needed. Therefore, each virtue was described as comprised of a determined set of universal “character strengths.” These character strengths are the path to “achieve the virtues” (p. 133). An individual exhibits a virtue by displaying one or more of the character strengths that make up that virtue. The character strengths are “a family of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” (Park, 2004, p. 13). Each character strength displays most or all of the criteria listed below.

- Is ubiquitous: is widely recognized across cultures.
- Is fulfilling: contributes to individual fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness broadly construed.
- Is morally valued: is valued in its own right and not for tangible outcomes it may produce.
- Does not diminish others: elevates others who witness it, producing admiration, not jealousy.

- Has a nonfelicitous opposite: has obvious antonyms that are “negative.”
- Is trait-like: is an individual difference with demonstrable generality and stability.
- Is measurable: has been successfully measured by researchers as an individual difference.
- Is distinct: is not redundant (conceptually or empirically) with other character strengths.
- Has paragons: is strikingly embodied in some individuals.
- Has prodigies: is precociously shown by some children or youth.
- Can be selectively absent: is missing altogether in some individuals.
- Has enabling institutions: is the deliberate target of societal practices and rituals that try to cultivate it (Peterson, 2006, pp. 141-142).

Each virtue groups together character strengths that are theoretically similar. Listed below are the 24 character strengths, organized under the six virtues. The virtues and character strengths are fully detailed in Peterson and Seligman (2004).

- Wisdom and knowledge: creativity, curiosity, open-minded, love of learning, and perspective.
- Courage: bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality.
- Humanity: love, kindness, and social intelligence.
- Justice: citizenship, fairness, and leadership.
- Temperance: forgiveness and mercy, humility/modesty, prudence, and self-regulation.
- Transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Even though each group of character strengths is alike, every strength is different from the others (Peterson, 2006). Character strengths are not interchangeable; each is unique. Theoretically, they can be learned (Gillham et al., 2011; Park, 2004). “Good character is more than bad character negated or minimized” (Peterson, 2006, p. 139). Good character is the acquisition and utilization of the virtues and character strengths. By applying these strengths, an individual is assumed to attain a more positive and fulfilling life.

The next phase of the VIA project was to operationalize the VIA classification to measure a person’s strengths (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Tillman, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson, 2006; Worrell & Hale, 2001). Peterson and Seligman developed the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). It is a self-report survey, created for adults (18 and over), and it measures an individual’s level of the strengths outlined in the VIA classification.

Based on the VIA-IS, Nansook Park developed the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth). This self-report survey is for children and adolescents, 10-17 years of age. It measures the same strengths of character as the adult version, but the questions are more age appropriate for youth (Gillham et al., 2011; Park, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006). Park and Peterson (2006) did an exploratory factor analysis using the VIA-Youth questionnaire and identified four factors:

temperance strengths: prudence, self-regulation, and perseverance, plus authenticity...*intellectual strengths*—more broadly, cognitive strengths—love of learning, creativity, curiosity, appreciation of beauty, fairness, and open-mindedness...*theological strengths* because the strengths that loaded most strongly were hope, religiousness, and love (cf. Aquinas, 1989); also included were zest, gratitude, social intelligence, and leadership...[and] *other-directed strengths* of modesty, kindness,

teamwork, and bravery, which means we can identify this factor as one of communion or collectivism. (p. 901)

Although Park and Peterson identified four factors, they plan to continue using the same six virtues in the youth version, as the adult version. However, in the future, they may use the results of the four factor analysis to create another, shorter version of the questionnaire.

The field of positive psychology encompasses more than just individuals identifying and working with their VIA strengths. “At the subjective level [positive psychology] is about valued subjective experiences; well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). It also extends to the universal level. By definition, the virtue “justice” is about acquiring civic strengths that support and inspire “a healthy community life” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, 2000). And, Park and Peterson (2009) stated that, “humanity related strengths...are necessary for a viable society” (p. 70). Therefore, even though the pursuit of identifying and working on one’s strengths is to increase one’s own well-being, these individual strengths also then contribute to society.

Positive Psychology and Youth

As stated earlier, there are several predictors used to identify students who are at risk for dropping out. Most of the research and programs over the past few decades have approached the problem using a primarily problem-focused model to improve a student’s mental status and his ability to graduate. Unfortunately, “such a deficit-oriented focus leads to treatment services that are primarily reactive and limited in scope” (Clonan et al., 2004, p. 102). Also, when using a problem based approach it is often necessary to wait for a child to be diagnosed with a disorder. Positive psychology can provide services before a diagnosis is determined, potentially helping

youth during a vulnerable time (Clonan et al., 2004). In addition, “most of the well-established predictors of dropout (e.g. race and socioeconomic status) are not amenable to change and provide little in the way of intervention” (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 26). Over time, prevention and intervention programs have focused on working with self-esteem issues, delinquency, aggression, and trauma due to poverty, abuse and neglect (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Miller, Nickerson, & Jimerson, 2009; Newcomb et al., 2002; Park & Peterson, 2008; Rumberger, 1987; Suh & Suh, 2007; Tidwell, 1988; Worrell & Hale, 2001; Zvoch, 2006). These are all clearly notable and necessary programs, but only treat one side of the issue, a youth’s deficits. These treatment options necessitate an early identification of the problem and the need to “patch up the damage.” “In such models, youth is seen as a period fraught with hazards, and many young people are seen as potential problems that must be straightened out before they can do serious harm to themselves or to others” (Damon, 2004, p. 14). Working with children only from a negative perspective, and not from a positive one, can help perpetuate a child’s thought that he is “broken” and needs to be fixed. Youth with low academic and social achievement often find it more difficult to find skills in which they are competent, compared to their peers. This introduces another layer of problems. For example, feeling inadequate can perpetuate feelings of pessimism and low self-esteem. According to Worrell and Hale (2001, p. 372) “pessimistic people do worse than optimistic people...they achieve less at school, on the job, and on the playing field than their talents augur.” Park and Peterson (2008) agree that there needs to be a new way to address children’s issues, and that “psychologists and school counselors interested in promoting human potential need to start with different assumptions and to pose different questions from their peers who assume only a disease model” (p. 85).

Positive psychology interventions for adults, adolescents and children are based on helping individuals increase their well-being and lead more fulfilling lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In a school setting, positive psychology interventions identify a child's strengths and internal resources and work to incorporate these positive traits into the child's interactions with the world, ultimately increasing his overall well-being (Miller et al., 2009; Miller & Nickerson, 2007; Park & Peterson, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2008; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Research has shown that the traits of vitality, kindness, social intelligence, self-control, appreciation of beauty, hope, bravery, humor, and spirituality, all elements of good character, have had a positive impact on illnesses, psychological disorders, trauma and stress (Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2008). Good character is also "associated with desired outcomes such as school success, leadership, tolerance and the valuing of diversity, the ability to delay gratification, kindness and altruism...[as well as] a reduction of problems such as substance use, alcohol abuse, smoking, violence, depression and suicidal ideation" (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 86). Among youth, research found that "the strengths of hope, zest, and leadership were substantially related to fewer internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, whereas the strengths of persistence, honesty, prudence, and love were substantially related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression" (p. 89). Since the development and presentation of character strengths has been related to less psychopathology, greater school success, and less delinquent behavior in adolescents, further research into adolescents dropping out of high school in general, and character strengths in particular, seems a logical step.

According to Park & Peterson (2009), the most common character traits for adolescents are "gratitude, humor, and love" (p. 70). "Prudence, forgiveness, spirituality and self-regulation"

are the least common (p. 70). Among youths older than 10, the strengths “of the heart,” specifically gratitude, vitality, love and hope are more strongly linked to life satisfaction than “more cerebral strengths like love of learning” (Peterson, 2006, p. 155). The more cerebral strengths, or strengths “of the head” also include “creativity, critical thinking, and aesthetic appreciation” and are “individual in nature” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 89). Due to this discovery, Park and Peterson (2008) suggest that it is important to improve the strengths “of the heart” (i.e., love, vitality, gratitude and hope) if any student is low on these strengths. In their longitudinal study of middle schoolers, Park and Peterson found that these same four traits “at the beginning of the school year were related to *increased* levels of life satisfaction by the end of the year” (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 71). Miller, Nickerson and Jimerson (2009) also believe that the strength hope is essential to a student’s success. Improving hope has several advantages. It increases coping skills, decreases depression, protects against events that directly affect at-risk youth (Miller et al., 2009) and “has an impact on their decision to stay in school and, perhaps, on their chances of success in school” (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 373).

In the same longitudinal study, Park and Peterson (2006) found an association between academic achievement and character strengths. “After controlling for student IQ scores, it was found that the character strengths of perseverance, fairness, gratitude, honesty, hope, and perspective predicted end-of-year GPA (grade point average)” (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 71). Due to these findings, they believe that, “the encouragement of character strengths would not only make students happier, healthier, and more socially connected but also help them attain better grades. Working on students’ character is therefore not a luxury but a necessity” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 89). As stated earlier, past studies have shown that academic competence is the highest predictor of a student dropping out. Park and Peterson’s findings are important as

they imply that academic competence can be influenced not solely by intellectual aptitude, but by certain character strengths as well (Park & Peterson 2009, 2008, 2006).

Other Positive Psychology Models

This study intentionally chose to use the VIA classification system to see what positive characteristics at-risk students, who graduated, may have had in common over other positive psychology models, such as mindfulness, hope, gratitude, forgiveness, flow and optimism (Miller & Nickerson, 2007). The research on these other models focuses on an individual's well-being. In addition, each model has created an intervention that tackles a specific dilemma, such as depression. Each model focuses on one or two factors to alleviate negative symptoms (Miller & Nickerson, 2007). However, these models do not address the more comprehensive study of learning about a population's strengths that the current study addresses.

Another construct that looks at the positive characteristics of an individual is resilience. "Resilience is identified as the process of encountering and coping with the aftermath of negative experiences, resulting in positive developmental outcomes or avoidance of negative outcomes" (Brownlee et al., 2013, p. 437). Resilience stands apart from other strength based approaches because to be resilient, a person must positively adapt after overcoming acute adversity (Brownlee et al., 2013; Damon, 2004; Finn & Rock, 1997; Masten, 2001). Due to this criterion, resilience theory only focuses on a finite group of individuals. This differs from positive psychology, which is not limited to working only with people who have a "background of danger, stress, and deficit" (Damon, 2004, p. 16); positive psychology is applicable to all individuals (Damon, 2004; Marten & Marsh, 2008). However, despite this difference between resilience theory and positive psychology, they are both concerned with the study of factors that help individuals overcome adversity and excel in life.

Prior research has shown that resilient individuals have similar psychosocial resources that fall into the following three categories: academic, social and conduct (Masten, 2001). Past studies agree that having a close bond and support from an adult was essential for youth to foster resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Masten, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Werner, 1990). Resilient adolescents had one or more of the following personal attachments: parental support, a bond with a family member (i.e. grandparent or sibling), or community support (i.e. teachers and friends). Having any of these attachments was shown to be critical in order to ensure that students at-risk of school failure succeeded (Damon, 2004; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Masten, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Werner, 1990). In addition, parental support was shown to be a protective factor for resilient youth “because it moderates the effects of poverty on violent behavior” (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). As previously stated, deviant behavior is a risk factor for dropping out, so reducing the likelihood a student will engage in delinquent behavior increases the student’s chance of remaining in school. These results coincide with the strengths-based positive psychology research on the character strength love. Prior research on love found that a supportive adult in an at-risk student’s life helped improve the teenager’s engagement with school, improved the student’s ability to learn and increased their life satisfaction (Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). In addition, love was also found to decrease adolescents’ negative external behaviors such as aggression (Park & Peterson, 2008). The results of these studies highlight the importance of at-risk youth having meaningful connections with an adult to help ensure they are better equipped and able to succeed both in life and in school.

Studies also found resilient adolescents have other common factors, they are:

self-regulation skills, social skills, intrinsic motivation, a desire to succeed, higher educational aspirations than non-resilient youth, maturity, optimism about the future, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and increased intellectual functioning (Damon, 2004; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Masten, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Werner, 1990). Several of these resilience factors correspond to the VIA list of character strengths; these strengths are self-regulation, social intelligence, persistence, integrity, hope and perspective. Prior research has found that the VIA character strengths “make students happier, healthier, and more socially connected [and] help them attain better grades” (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 89), which supports the resilience research that self-regulation skills, social skills, intrinsic motivation, a desire to succeed, higher educational aspirations than others, maturity, optimism and self-efficacy help resilient students attain school success.

However, there was one significant difference between the strengths-based research and the resilience research, character strength studies on adolescents found that intelligence is not necessary for at-risk students to succeed in school (Park & Peterson, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2006). Another difference is there are eighteen more character strengths that can improve a student’s well-being. No other resiliency research was found where resilient students had traits that corresponded to the remaining character strengths. As previously mentioned, positive psychology studies have indicated several more character strengths, beyond the six strengths resilient youth possess, can help students succeed. Therefore, character strengths based research may provide more meaningful information than resilience research for psychologists, school counselors and teachers, especially if the goal is to help students, even if they are not resilient, achieve academic success and increased well-being.

This study chose to use positive psychology's VIA classification system to identify their strengths instead of another positive psychology model for two main reasons. First, using the VIA classification system provided a common vocabulary to study and discuss this study's population. Other models found similar results across their studies but used different phrases to say the same thing. For example, Masters (2001) stated that resilient youth had self-regulation skills but Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) referred to the same idea as social competence. Although these two researchers were discussing the same concept, it is difficult to say whether they meant the exact same thing. Using the clearly defined 24 character strengths avoided possible ambiguity when discussing this study's results. In addition, choosing to use a character strengths based study enabled this study to directly compare its' results to other research results that used the VIA classification system.

In addition to needing a recognizable, defined list of factors, I chose positive psychology to study this phenomenon because there remains a dearth of research on character strengths and the success of individuals at risk of dropping out of school. Prevention programs for children in school using a positive development perspective are rare, and literature on what character strengths at-risk youth who graduate have, does not exist (Miller et al., 2009; Miller & Nickerson, 2007).

“As positive psychology finds its way into prevention and therapy, techniques that build positive traits will become commonplace. Psychologists have good reason to believe that techniques that build positive traits and positive subjective experiences work, both in therapy and perhaps more importantly in prevention” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 12). “The theory suggests that students who feel competent in an area (e.g., academics) will anticipate future success in related pursuits (e.g., earning a high school diploma) and these perceptions can

lead to positive outcomes as articulated by Seligman” (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 374). If character strengths of those who graduate are identified, and at-risk students who lack these particular strengths are given tools to increase them, perhaps the number of high school dropouts will decrease. Although empirical research using the positive psychology framework for interventions is increasing, the study of children and adolescents is limited compared to the study of adults, and it is severely lacking in the area of incorporating character strengths into school-based interventions (Miller et al., 2009; Miller & Nickerson, 2007).

Conclusion

“It is not the job of Positive Psychology to tell you that you should be optimistic, or spiritual, or kind or good-humored; it is rather to describe the consequences of these traits (for example, that being optimistic brings about less depression, better physical health, and higher achievement, at a cost perhaps of less realism)” (Seligman, 2002, p. 129). This study was not designed to judge the character of those who were at risk but graduated; it is to investigate the views and observations of school personnel regarding what strengths at-risk students employed, and perhaps what character strengths were not as fundamental, to achieve their goal of graduation. Everyone has strengths and these strengths influence how we engage in the world. From this perspective it seems that at-risk high school students who graduated, may have similar strengths to each other. And if this is the case, prevention programs might be designed to work with at-risk students, either as a group, or individually, focusing on building character strengths and virtues, as opposed to only attempting to alleviate or overcome negative conditions. Studies have shown that character strengths are related to school success, although there are no studies that look at students at risk of dropping out and school success. The point of this study was to focus on those students who exhibit risk factors to dropping out, but continue to persevere and

achieve the goal of graduation when the odds were stacked against them. Perhaps this information can be used to help other students in the pursuit of their success.

Method

The goal of this study was to determine the participants' perceptions about what strengths at-risk students who follow through and graduate from high school have, using the conceptual framework of positive psychology, and its classification system of virtues and character strengths. To reveal the strengths of these students, this study used a qualitative methodology, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). In addition, this study included a 5-point, Likert scale survey. The participants were asked to rate how frequently at-risk students who graduated employed each of the 24 VIA characteristics.

A qualitative methodology was chosen to get a more detailed viewpoint of these students' strengths from the perspective of their guidance counselors and teachers. The interview questions were open-ended and did not refer directly to the VIA classification system; questions were simply asked about the participants' opinions on the students' strengths. This allowed themes to present themselves. The themes that came out of the interviews were written down, and later categorized under the appropriate character strengths and virtues previously outlined (Mertens, 2005). The rationale for using IPA was because of its ability to illuminate the participants' insight into their personal experience of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This study was designed to explore and document the participants' perceptions of what strengths at-risk students who graduated seemed to access to succeed. In-depth interviews were used to ferret out those strengths. This was a subjective process, allowing for a more investigative study and a deeper, more organic flow of information from the participants.

Another aspect of IPA is the part the researcher plays in the interpretation. "The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). It is

acknowledged that the researcher entered this study with her biases and own understanding of the world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). All of these factors were taken into account as the interview, analysis, and interpretation phases moved forward.

Following the interview phase, each participant was given a brief, 24 question, 5-point Likert scale survey. The goal of the survey was to determine which VIA classification strengths the participants believed at-risk students who graduated used most frequently. Once the survey was completed, each participant was asked one more question, “Is there anything you would like to add?” All of these answers were also analyzed using IPA.

Participants

Eight participants were selected for this study. Three were guidance counselors and five were teachers; they all worked at a large public suburban high school, located near a large city in the northeast. All of the participants had worked with this population for between 9 and 19 years. Five participants were women, and three were men. One participant was African American, and the remaining seven were White. The criterion for acceptance into the study was whether the participant had personal knowledge of the progress of one or more students who were deemed at risk for dropping out when the student(s) entered high school, but still graduated. Both guidance counselors and teachers were asked because they both have close relationships with students, and interact with them. The guidance counselors who were chosen followed at-risk students throughout their high school careers, and the teachers also often found themselves involved in the lives of their students throughout their schooling. The exclusion criterion for a teacher or guidance counselor who agreed to participate was, they did not know any at-risk students who eventually graduated (e.g., did not know student at-risk status or only knew dropouts).

Recruitment. Only one high school was contacted. It has a total enrollment of 1,797 students. This includes grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. The high school's ethnic breakdown is as follows: 60% White, 15% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 8% African-American and 6% "multi-ethnic." Twenty-six percent of the students speak a first language other than English. In 2013, the year data were collected for this study, the senior class had 428 students. This cohort entered the ninth grade with 464 students. 93.5% of the 2013 senior class graduated, 3.3% are still in school, 1.6% got a GED, and 1.6% dropped out. Please see Table 1 for a comprehensive breakdown of the 2013 senior class' dropout rates, graduation rates, and population breakdowns.

I began my recruitment by contacting the principal of the high school. She was emailed a description of the study and a request for me to speak to the staff. The principal agreed to allow me to proceed with my study. Ten guidance counselors were contacted through email, provided a brief description of the study, and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. The email also began the screening process by stating my inclusion criterion. Three guidance counselors agreed to be interviewed, and met inclusion criteria. I spoke to each of the guidance counselors, and since there were fewer than six people who agreed to participate, they each gave me a list of teachers they believed would be interested in participating. I sent the same email that was sent to the guidance counselors to 15 teachers. Six teachers responded, and agreed to participate. Five of the six teachers met the inclusion criteria and were added to the study.

All the participants were provided with a consent form, a study explanation, and an explanation of confidentiality. Each participant was given the option of an in-person interview or an interview over the phone, but everyone agreed to an in-person interview.

Table 1

4-year Graduation Rate (2013)

Student Group	# in Cohort	% Graduated	% Dropped Out
All students	428	93.5	1.6
Male	223	92.8	2.2
Female	205	94.1	1.0
English Language Learners	25	92.0	4.0
Students w/disabilities	88	81.8	2.3
Low Income	73	79.5	5.5
High Needs	158	84.2	3.2
African-American/Black	41	85.4	0.0
Asian	66	100.0	0.0
Hispanic/Latino	44	88.6	4.5
White	256	94.5	2.0
Multi-race/Non-Hispanic, Latino	21	85.7	0.0

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.)

Measures

Interview. Semistructured interviews were used to build rapport between the participant and the researcher and to allow the interview to take its own course. Due to the principles of IPA, a few particular questions were asked in order to ensure relevant points were covered, but

space was allowed during the interview for other questions or points to arise and be explored (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The questions asked by the interviewer were:

1. How long have you been employed at your school?
2. In your time at this school, what have you noticed about which students do or don't dropout?
3. What factors concern you the most, or factors that you think could impede a student's ability to graduate?
4. Can you share any stories about students who surprised everyone by their success?
5. What was it about these students that helped them?
6. What qualities have you seen in students who overcame a lot to graduate?
7. What have you done to try to support at-risk students? For example, students who came from a low SES, had poor grades, did not socialize well with other students, and/or expressed deviant behavior.
8. Is there anything we have not discussed that comes to mind about students, in general, who succeeded despite the negative odds against them?
9. After the survey was administered, I asked, "Is there anything you want to add?"

Survey. The survey was a 5-point, Likert scale. It included 24 questions, each of which asked about a specific VIA classification strength. The Likert scale was used to gauge how frequently the participants believed at-risk students employed each VIA strength while attending high school. Instructions were provided at the top of the survey. The participant was asked to read the instructions and then read the questions and circle one of the five answer choices: "Always," "Usually," "Half the time," "Not often," or "Never" (Mertens, 2005). All of the participants were given the same directions, "I want you to answer each question keeping

only the at-risk students you know that graduated in mind.” Each question asked about a different VIA strength, and gave an example of that particular strength. An example of a question is, “How often did these students use CREATIVITY? For example, how often did they do something that was original or innovative? Always, Usually, Half the time, Not often, Never.” Please see Appendix A to review the survey.

Procedure

Participants engaged in a semistructured interview, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed later. After the interview, each participant was given a survey, and it was completed in the presence of the researcher. The survey used a Likert scale and took approximately 15 minutes. Upon completion of the survey, each participant was asked one last question, “Is there is anything you want to add?” All of the responses were recorded, transcribed, and added to their corresponding interview transcripts.

Data Analyses

As laid out by Smith and Osborn (2003), IPA follows several steps once the interview is completed. First, I transcribed the taped interviews. Next, I read each transcript several times. The reason for this was to become very familiar with each transcript. IPA suggests that with multiple transcripts, each one should be read and analyzed separately (Smith & Osborn, 2003). I took notes continuously during this rereading process as new thoughts emerged. My notes included summarizations, associations and “preliminary interpretations” of emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 67). In IPA, these themes can stand alone, or some may group together (Smith & Osborn, 2003). My next step was to review my notes and extract any higher level themes. I then repeated this process for each of the remaining transcripts. IPA allows the option of approaching each transcript either from scratch or with previously developed themes

from other transcripts in mind (Smith & Osborn, 2003). I found it was not possible for me to approach each transcript without thinking about the previous ones, but I did not use only previously developed themes; when a new theme emerged, I added it.

In using IPA, the researcher engages a second reader to improve the study's validity (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Once all of the transcripts were analyzed, I met with my second reader, a psychologist well versed in IPA. I provided her with transcripts and reviewed the procedure. We each analyzed our transcripts separately. Then, we met and compared, discussed, and identified the themes we both agreed were in the interviews. As is typical in IPA, we discarded themes that were weak or did not fit (Smith & Osborn, 2003). When we both agreed that a theme was present, it was added to the "theme list." We then looked at the language and definitions of the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues. We evaluated the themes to see if they fit into the virtues and character strengths as defined by VIA. Together, we created a final list of character strengths and their corresponding themes. There was one theme that the second reader and I agreed on, but it did not fall under a specific character strength. This theme is addressed in the Results section. We then discussed whether any biases may have influenced the results, since we both worked with this population and were previously familiar with positive psychology. This ended the second reader's participation in the study.

I then organized all of the themes, virtues and character strengths. Systematically, I reviewed each theme, and what character strength it was associated with, and then went back and reviewed the sixteen transcripts. Going back to the transcripts was done to ensure the themes, and their corresponding strengths, agreed with what the participants said. This was possible because both my, and the second reader's transcripts, had all of the notes we both took while we were reading them. These notes included underlined quotes, highlights of sections of the

interviews, our corresponding thoughts on what we believed the participants were saying, and the themes that emerged from each interview. Comparing the final list of themes to the transcripts' notes was done to ensure that in the context of what the participant said, each theme belonged under that character strength. Several quotes are presented in the Results section.

Survey. Each survey had the same instructions and asked the same 24 questions. Eight surveys were given. Each one was given at the end of the participant's interview. After all of the surveys were given, they were collected and analyzed. Every question had the same answer choices, and each word choice had a corresponding number: 5=always, 4=usually, 3=half the time, 2=not often, and 1=never. Mean responses were calculated for each survey question.

Results

This study was designed to determine the participants' perceptions about what strengths at-risk students who followed through and graduated had. The first part of this study was a semistructured interview. The questions were worded to encourage the participants to relate the strengths they saw in these students. Using IPA, my second reader and I came up with a list of themes and then organized them under the VIA classification system of virtues and character strengths. The following section details what themes emerged, and what virtues and character strengths they imbued. Then, the results of the Likert surveys are presented. In the surveys, the participants were asked directly about each of the 24 character strengths and the extent they believed their students exhibited them. Survey question means and standard deviations are listed and the interview and survey results are compared.

Analysis of Virtues, Character Strengths, and Themes

As previously stated in the Methods section, after transcribing the interviews, the second reader and I both read and reread each of them. Independently, we both took notes, and culled our notes down to themes we believed we saw in the interviews. At our meeting, we compared our results, and if we both saw the same theme, it was added to the "theme list." If only one of us saw a theme among the interviews, together we looked back at the data, and resolved any disagreements. As is typical of IPA, if we did not both agree that a theme existed, it was discarded (Smith & Osborn, 2003). We then systematically went through each theme and decided if it was related to one of the character strengths or not. For example, we both believed there was a theme of "curiosity," so we placed the theme under the character strength curiosity. However, not all of the themes that came out of the interviews corresponded as clearly to VIA strengths. For example, the theme "goal-oriented" was placed under the virtue courage and the

character strength persistence. Courage is, “emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). The definition of persistence is, “finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; ‘getting it out the door;’ taking pleasure in completing tasks” (p. 29). We both agreed that being goal-oriented helped these students persist, despite numerous obstacles, in making it to graduation. A participant stated, “He wanted to walk across the stage. He wanted that moment. So I think there had to be that desire inside to have, there had to be something that they are working towards. So that made, I think made a difference.”

Finally, we discussed whether any biases entered into our findings. She and I have both worked with this population, and we wanted to make sure that none of the results were influenced by our opinions. First, we discussed what our biases might be. We both felt we needed to be sure we did not extrapolate themes from the participants’ words that represented our own dealings with at-risk students but did not represent the sentiments of the participants. Together, we looked at the theme list results, and reviewed why each of us chose that theme. We both found examples of the themes and their corresponding character strengths that clearly showed they were true representations of the participants’ responses, and were not affected by any bias from either of us. Therefore, we agreed that we had minimized the way that our past interactions with similar students affected how we analyzed the interviews, or the results.

Results of Virtues, Character Strengths and Themes

To reiterate from the Literature Review, the VIA classification system has six virtues. Each virtue has its own set of character strengths. At least one character strength that corresponds to that virtue must be present in order for someone to be considered to have that virtue (Park, 2004). The results of the interview portion of this study showed that the

participants saw four of the six virtues among the students. The at-risk adolescents showed wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, and transcendence. The virtue called justice, and its three character strengths of citizenship, fairness and leadership, did not arise in any of the eight interviews; neither did the virtue, temperance, or its four character strengths, forgiveness and mercy, humility, prudence, or self-regulation.

Among the four virtues that were identified, not all of their character traits were displayed. In the next section, I will review each virtue and list the character strengths that were presented, as well as the interview themes that demonstrate them. If a theme's placement is not readily obvious, I will explain why it was categorized as being consistent with that strength. I also list the character strengths of that virtue that were not depicted in the interviews. Please note that all of the results are derived from the opinions of the guidance counselors and teachers; they are not a direct assessment of the qualities these students possess. To see the results at a glance, see Table 2 and Appendix B. Table 2 lists the virtues, strengths, and the themes derived from the interviews; and, Appendix B lists the themes, and the corresponding quotes that clarify them.

Wisdom and Knowledge

The first virtue is wisdom and knowledge, which is defined as, "cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). Its character strengths are: creativity, curiosity, open-minded, love of learning, and perspective. We did not find themes regarding the students' creativity or being open-minded. However, we did notice curiosity, love of learning and perspective. One participant stated, "...The kids would often be curious and often did want to actually learn things..." Although it did not seem that the students had a *love* of learning, they had a genuine "interest in learning."

Table 2

Virtues, Character Strengths and Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Virtues	Character Strengths	Themes
Wisdom and knowledge	Curiosity	Curiosity
	Love of learning	Interested in learning
	Perspective	Perspective, externalizes negative factors, strong sense of self
Courage	Persistence	Persistence/perseverance, inner drive/motivation to succeed, being passionate about something, has experienced success, resilience, hard working, goal-oriented
	Integrity	Made good decisions despite adversity, being a good role model, feeling of responsibility for others, maturity, sense of control
	Vitality	Energetic, not settling
Humanity	Love	Sense of belonging, has positive peer relationships, has positive relationships with adults, ability to form positive relationships, has family support, has a strong

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Virtues	Character Strengths	Themes
Transcendence		supplemental support system, willing to ask for help
	Hope	Hope/optimism
	Spirituality	Faith/spirituality
	Pride	Cares what others think, desire to make others proud, pride in oneself

Perspective is the third character strength; it is, “being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). We found the following three themes fell under this strength: “a strong sense of self,” “externalizes negative factors,” and “perspective.” These themes all spoke to “having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people” (p. 29). For example, when one participant was asked what qualities he saw in these students, he said, “I think a strong sense of self, I’ve seen in most of them. That they really had the capacity to know, this isn’t the real them, the real them is someone that is successful.” He later stated, “They’ve had this idea that things are supposed to be better, that they and everyone around them should be figuring out how to help them get things to the way they are supposed to be.” In other words, these students knew themselves, and believed that many of the factors that affected them negatively were due to external factors, not internal. These students made sense of why they were struggling in school and in the world. The following demonstrates a specific example of a student with perspective. A participant told a story about a teen he knew from 9th through 12th grades. This student’s older brother dropped out at age 15 to deal drugs, and his

oldest brother died while in jail for armed robbery. But he knew himself and understood the world that was around him. He told the participant, “I am not going to go down the route that my older brother went down. My older brother was smart, he chose that life, I’m choosing a different life in spite of him.” There were several stories where other students looked at their circumstances, and displayed this same type of wisdom; they saw “the big picture” (Park, 2004, p. 49).

Courage

The second virtue is courage. This virtue had the most themes associated with it. It’s character strengths are: bravery, persistence, integrity and vitality. Bravery was never mentioned, but persistence, integrity and vitality all had corresponding themes. Persistence revealed itself multiple times, in different ways, and was the strength that revealed itself most often. We found nine themes relating to persistence; its’ definition is “finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; ‘getting it out the door’; taking pleasure in completing tasks” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). This study found the following themes associated with persistence: “persistence/perseverance,” “inner drive and motivation to succeed,” “being passionate about something,” “has experienced success,” “resilience,” “hard working,” “goal-oriented,” and they “make good decisions despite adversity.” Every interview talked about students persevering. Some participants stated it, for example, “The ability of humans to overcome and persist, is really sometimes, almost superhuman, sometimes. But a lot of them do it, but sometimes, again, some of these kids, you hear some of these stories and you’re like ‘wow.’” Others told stories of students who personified it; for example, “She is now going to school because she wants to help others and become a nutritionist. She has a passion. The only common factor I see is that they want, they see a prize at the end of it, that’s not just graduation.

It's beyond that." Another example of perseverance in spite of obstacles is of a boy in a manual wheelchair who lived a mile away from school, and buses wouldn't pick him up because "they don't want to have to deal with the wheelchair guy, even through snow storms and heat waves." But, for this student, there was "never an attendance issue, never late to class, never heard him complain. Never used any of his disabilities for a reason of not doing well." Every participant had at least two stories of students who exemplified the strength of perseverance.

The character strength integrity's definition is, "speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). We found the themes that emerged under integrity were: "being a good role model," "feelings of responsibility for others," "maturity," and "having a sense of control." The following is a quote from one of the participants that speaks to the first three themes:

...Some of my conversations with him were that he's the oldest child and his younger siblings look up to him, and that it really matters what he does. And, I think he felt that way, and he felt responsible anyway, and while I personally don't want him to feel like the adult in the family, I think that he said...there were mistakes that he made, but in a way he set a good example, despite all the obstacles.

This story was repeated several times, in different ways, about other students fulfilling these roles for siblings and children. The theme of having a sense of control in life spoke to the part of integrity where they are "taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). An example of when a student felt a sense of control is, "So, he really had the example, and saw, I can do well, and not choose that [negative] path. He really saw it as a choice." Like this teen, once students felt they had some control over their life, and their future,

they became an active participant in what happened in their lives. They asked for help, made better choices, and did what they needed to graduate. They took responsibility for their actions.

The final character strength under courage is vitality. Its definition is, “approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). Two themes emerged here, “energetic” and “not settling.” And although energetic deserves to be mentioned, it needs to be taken in the context of these students’ qualities. They did not necessarily exhibit cheerful energy, but they did approach life with a positive energy. When I asked one participant what qualities these students used to overcome their tremendous obstacles, she said, “I think, energy. Like for most of these kids they’ve somehow had the energy to have things go really badly, and been really exhausted, but they turned it around.” And, several stories talked about students who put in a lot of effort and energy to succeed. Next is the theme not settling, which speaks to “not doing things halfway or halfheartedly” (p. 29). One teacher talked about a student who was doing poorly, but began accepting small amounts of help. This led to her asking for more help, and she began succeeding in her classes. After that transition happened, the student’s attitude changed, she would no longer settle for average grades, and she did not approach school “halfheartedly.” The participant stated, “So, rather than just coming to school now, and passing her classes and getting her homework done, now its about getting an ‘A’.” Other students also had this changeover. Once they started doing well, they approached school and life with vigor and did not settle for doing or being average.

Humanity

The third virtue is humanity, “interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). Humanity has three character strengths:

love, kindness, and social intelligence. We found no themes relating to social intelligence, or kindness, but the opposite was true of love. Love was second only to persistence in the number of times it came up in the interviews. Per the VIA classification system, love is defined as “valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people” (p. 30). Several themes came from the interviews that fell under this strength; they are: “sense of belonging,” “has positive peer relationships,” “has positive relationships with adults,” “the ability to form positive relationships,” “has family support,” “has a strong supplemental support system,” and is “willing to ask for help.” These themes came up over and over again, and each speaks directly to love’s VIA definition, which is about relationships with others and social support. The one overarching characteristic everyone was vehement about in the interviews was that the student who made it to graduation formed a positive, close relationship with at least one person who advocated for him. One participant, who teaches only at-risk students said, “I think having that connection. Connection with each other, more than anything else. A sense of community, a sense of family, and then having adult figures they can trust.”

Transcendence

The last virtue is transcendence, or, “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30). The character strengths that did not show up as themes were appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude and humor. Hope and spirituality, however, did show up. Hope is defined as, “expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about” (p. 30). The theme of “hope/optimism” was discussed in almost every interview. The participants stated that the students often believed in a positive future and that their circumstances will

improve. “I think they’ve had a belief that things are supposed to be better. Like the stuff that’s going wrong is wrong. They haven’t believed that this is what I deserve, it’s what it’s supposed to be, or, this is the most I can do, or this is the most I can expect.” Often, a more positive outlook came after they achieved a small success, building on their confidence that they could do the work. This led to a vision of a more successful future, and a belief that everything would work out.

The last character strength is spirituality, which is, “having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort” (p. 30). The theme of “spirituality” appeared, but not often. One of the participants stated she believed one of the factors that helped a student make it through school was “faith in a higher power,” and another felt the students had faith, but they did not “lean on spirituality, like, ‘for the grace of god, I do this now.’” And among the other participants, faith only had a role if the student’s family was directly involved in a church, which was rare.

Non-VIA Strengths

Finally, one other theme was prevalent in this study, “pride.” This theme encompasses “cares what others think,” “the desire to make others proud,” and having a feeling of “pride in oneself.” The theme pride is a positive characteristic, and a different type of motivator that helps these students succeed, but it does not fall within the theory.

Survey Results

A Likert survey of 24 questions was given to each participant. To find the numerical mean to each question, the answers had the following corresponding numbers:

5=always, 4=usually, 3=half the time, 2=not often, and 1=never. The character strength means and standard deviations are listed from the highest mean to the lowest in Table 3.

The survey results found 21 character strengths occurred between usually and half the time. Finding a higher number of strengths on the survey than the interviews was expected because the survey required recognition, where the interviews relied on recall. The remaining three strengths occurred less than half the time; these strengths were teamwork, prudence and leadership with means of 2.94, 2.81 and 2.75 respectively.

The character strength with the highest mean was humility (3.88). The top nine character strengths from the surveys had means above 3.50, placing them close to occurring usually. They ranged from a mean of 3.88 to 3.63 (see Table 3). The top nine survey strengths were humility, persistence, integrity, love, curiosity, bravery, social intelligence, gratitude and humor. In contrast to the surveys, the interviews did not find humility to be a strength. In addition, four more of the top nine character strengths found in the surveys differed from the strengths found in the interviews. The remaining four strengths that were not mentioned in the interviews but had a mean of 3.63 are bravery, social intelligence, gratitude and humor (see Table 3).

Correlation

A Spearman's rank correlation was used to see if there was a relationship between the ranks of the interview strengths (ordinal data), and the survey means (continuous values). The interview results were ranked in descending numerical order, from most frequent, to least frequent. The correlation coefficient is $r = 0.74$. Please see Table 4 for survey means and interview ranks.

Table 3

Student Strengths Survey Results vs. Interview Results

<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Strength</u>	<u>Interview Rank</u>	<u>Survey Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Temperance	Humility	N/A	3.88	0.64
Courage	Persistence	6	3.75	0.89
Courage	Integrity	5	3.75	0.71
Humanity	Love	7	3.75	1.04
Wisdom & Know.	Curiosity	1	3.63	0.92
Courage	Bravery	N/A	3.63	1.19
Humanity	Social Intelligence	N/A	3.63	1.06
Transcendence	Gratitude	N/A	3.63	1.06
Transcendence	Humor	N/A	3.63	0.92
Wisdom & Know.	Perspective	4	3.50	1.07
Humanity	Kindness	N/A	3.50	0.76
Justice	Fairness	N/A	3.38	0.74
Wisdom & Know.	Creativity	N/A	3.25	0.71
Transcendence	App. of Beauty	N/A	3.25	1.04
Transcendence	Hope	3	3.25	0.71
Wisdom & Know.	Open Minded	N/A	3.19	0.65
Wisdom & Know.	Love of Learning	1	3.19	0.65
Courage	Vitality	1	3.19	0.84
Temperance	Forgiveness	N/A	3.19	0.65

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Virtue	Strength	Interview	Survey	
		Rank	Mean	SD
Temperance	Self-regulation	N/A	3.00	0.76
Transcendence	Spirituality	2	3.00	1.31
Justice	Teamwork	N/A	2.94	0.68
Temperance	Prudence	N/A	2.81	0.75
Justice	Leadership	N/A	2.75	0.71

Table 4

Correlation Between Interviews and Surveys

<u>Character Strength</u>	<u>Survey Mean</u>	<u>Interview Rank</u>
Love	3.75	7
Persistence	3.75	6
Integrity	3.75	5
Curiosity	3.63	1
Perspective	3.50	4
Hope	3.38	3
Love of Learning	3.19	1
Vitality	3.19	1
Spirituality	3.00	2
r = 0.74		

Discussion

Studying students at risk of dropping out of high school through the lens of character strengths has not been done before. This study found that according to school personnel, certain character strengths are important in helping these students make it to graduation and supported the idea that positive psychology may help this population. This chapter discusses this study's findings on the most frequently endorsed character strengths and their implications. Following this are overall impressions and a summary of clinical implications, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

Character Strengths and Their Implications

The interviews conducted for this study revealed that nine of the 24 character strengths were mentioned frequently by school personnel as helping at-risk students complete school (see Table 3). This differed widely from the results of the survey, which found that 21 strengths appeared more than half the time (see Table 3). Although it was expected participants would endorse more strengths on the survey than in the interviews, this discrepancy was larger than expected. However, due to the strong correlation between the nine character strengths endorsed in both the interviews and the surveys (see Table 4), it appears that love, persistence, integrity, perspective, hope, spirituality, curiosity, love of learning, and vitality are recognized by school personnel as the most frequently practiced strengths at-risk students use to help get them to graduation.

Character Strengths of Students At Risk of Dropping Out

The remainder of this section will discuss the nine character strengths mentioned in the interviews, in rank order from the most frequently discussed strength to the least frequently discussed strength. Following this will be additional findings.

Love

The most frequently mentioned character strength throughout the interviews was love. Love was also considered by the participants to be the most important character strength this population utilized. Overwhelmingly, the participants' interviews discussed the need and the ability of these students to create meaningful bonds with both adults and peers. The participants made it clear that having a strong connection with an adult the student could trust was of paramount importance for these students to make it to graduation. When a new relationship was created between the school personnel and the student at risk, it was often due to the student needing someone to listen to them. Once at-risk students felt they could trust the adult, they became more open and confided what their needs were. After these needs were identified, the adults were allowed into the students' world to help them manage their hurdles to school success. Although making connections was difficult for many teens at the beginning of the school year, every student who graduated created and nurtured more than one positive interpersonal relationship over the course of their school career. These findings support prior research that indicates the importance of at-risk students having meaningful relationships with family, school personnel and peers (Damon, 2004; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Masten, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Park & Peterson, 2009; Werner, 1990; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). The results of this study clearly show the necessity of ensuring students at risk of dropping out feel connected.

Woolley and Bowen (2007) studied the impact of supportive adults on school engagement and at-risk youth. Their results showed that the more supportive adults there were in an adolescent's life, the more the teen engaged with school. Park and Peterson (2009) also found that having the strength love could improve a student's ability to learn. In addition, this study

also found individualized adult support with this population increased a student's motivation to learn and remain in school.

It is clear students at risk of dropping out would benefit from a program that includes reinforcing their connection to others within the school. Based on this, psychologists, school counselors and teachers would be wise to implement a program that promotes learning to bond with others. Woolley and Bowen's (2007) study suggests getting adults from the community to volunteer for mentoring programs, tutoring and coordinating organized artistic or athletic activities. Another option they suggest is working with adults the student already knows. One program they found effective asked every school staff member to volunteer to choose one at-risk student and give them special attention.

To enhance the strength love, Seligman (2002) suggested improving listening and speaking skills. A psychologist or school therapist in an individual or group setting could implement a program; or, a teacher could perform this task in a classroom. Seligman suggests giving the person who is speaking an object to hold in their hand, and then have them speak about their thoughts and feelings on a subject. Then one of the listeners paraphrases back what they heard without responding negatively or offering solutions. The listener's "job is only to show [he or she] understood what [he or she] heard" (p. 204). If the listener would like to comment, they can do so when they are given the object and the opportunity to speak. The purpose of this exercise is to learn to improve the students' ability to interact verbally with others so they may better bond with an individual in daily life.

Unfortunately, no research on character strengths based programs that targeted adolescents showed an increase in the strength love. However, a study on positive psychology

based forgiveness programs and youth showed that increased bonding was an after-effect of its implementation (Catalano et al., 2004). Implementing a forgiveness program may also help at-risk students by both teaching them how to forgive and improving their ability to bond with others.

In the future, until more research is completed on character strength based programs there may be a benefit to revisiting positive psychology programs, like the forgiveness intervention, to assess if an increase in bonding with others was ever an outcome. This may provide more ideas on how to promote bonding using a positive psychology framework.

Persistence

Persistence was the second most frequently mentioned strength by the participants. It was also discussed almost as often as love, highlighting that persistence is another important strength for these students to possess to graduate. The participants said the students who made it to graduation persisted because they wanted to prove themselves and did not want to give up. They were motivated. The participants often talked about this population persevering through the mayhem in their lives and the rigors of school because they had an internal drive to succeed. None of the participants were able to distinguish how this drive was tapped into, although some speculated it was maturity.

Prior research indicated that having the strength persistence positively influenced academic achievement (Newcomb et al., 2002; Park & Peterson, 2008), so it is clearly important to maintain or increase an at-risk student's desire to persist. Through the interviews with the participants, this study found that if an at-risk student's perseverance to achieve academically was derailed or did not exist, the most important factor for parents, educators and school counselors to focus on is to ensure that the student has a positive, personal connection with an

adult. The adult's assistance can come in different forms, for example, helping the teen find resources or providing emotional support. This study would like to emphasize that if an at-risk student has lost their motivation to make it to graduation, a positive relationship with an adult is the essential element to keeping a child in school. Therefore, these findings suggest that by adding exercises that improve the strength love to a strengths based intervention or prevention program, the program will also be shoring up the strength persistence.

Integrity

Integrity was the third most mentioned character strength, though it was mentioned approximately one third as often as the two prior strengths. However, the participants did consider it important because having integrity helped to motivate these students to graduate. This population showed their integrity by showing maturity and undertaking the responsibility of providing a positive role model for their siblings. They wanted to influence their sisters, brothers and children to stay in school by leading through example and graduating themselves. Prior research indicated integrity was a strength that influenced academic achievement (Park & Peterson, 2008). Unfortunately, no research was found on how integrity influenced academic success or ways to improve this strength. However, knowing that the root of the motivation for some students at risk of dropping out to complete high school is to provide a role model for others, school counselors and teachers are encouraged to remind this population that graduating provides a positive image for others to aspire to.

Perspective

The participants mentioned perspective slightly less frequently than integrity. However, it was important enough to be raised in the interviews. Previous studies have shown that perspective positively affected learning independent of intellectual ability (Kashdan & Yuen,

2007; Park & Peterson, 2008). In addition, having perspective as a strength, “predicted higher grades at the end of the year” (Gillham et al., 2011). Unfortunately, it is unclear in the research how perspective positively affected learning and grades; it was simply stated as a fact that adolescents with this strength were more successful academically. However, when the participants discussed the students who had this strength, it was not in relationship to academics or learning. School personnel found that youth who graduated often believed that whatever was getting in their way of school success was due to external conditions and the “real them” was someone who was successful. This indicates if a student is losing their interest in school, school-based therapists could work with a student on an individual basis to help them identify and discuss what external forces they believe are impeding them. Furthermore, the therapist should nurture the view that these obstacles can be overcome and their “true self” is someone who excels. The data indicates that working on increasing perspective is better handled by a professional therapist, however, teachers and parents can also help by reinforcing in these adolescents that they have the capacity to be successful both in school and in life.

Hope

Hope was also a strength discussed in the interviews, but was less important to the participants than the previously mentioned strengths. The participants told several stories that began with a student overcoming an obstacle and then built on that success. Multiple successes led students to believe there was an attainable, positive future for them. When these teens believed in this future, they recognized that graduating would help them attain it and this motivated them to remain in school. This result supports previous research that showed when students have optimistic educational goals, increased optimism acts as a protective factor against teens dropping out (Catalano et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2009; Suh & Suh, 2007, Worrell & Hale,

2001). In addition, past research found that hope was one of several strengths that had an impact on improving grades and achieving academic success (Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2008).

According to several studies, hope can be both learned and strengthened (Gillham et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2009; Park, 2004; Seligman et al., 2009). A few options to increase hope have been suggested in the positive psychology literature. This literature is intended for therapists, so psychologists and school counselors will need to implement these suggestions to improve this strength in a school setting. Miller and Nickerson (2007) suggest increasing hope by teaching adolescents to replace negative and irrational beliefs with more realistic ones, and then guide them to understand the new, healthier feeling. Miller and Nickerson also endorse problem-solving training and using acceptance and humor to help youth alleviate upsetting situations. Finally, Suh and Suh (2007) suggest school counselors discuss “educational aspirations and plans for the coming years” (p. 304) to help at-risk students develop positive educational outlooks. These are only a few suggestions, but they are positive psychology models proven to increase hope in youth.

Spirituality

Spirituality was also a strength found in the interviews, but it was not mentioned often. The participants commented that a student had spirituality for two reasons, either the student listened to the teachings of the church or they believed in a non-descript higher power. A longitudinal study concluded that “religious faith” was the most likely factor to keep at-risk youth from engaging in antisocial behavior; and another study concluded that having a “strong spiritual sense” had the same effect (Catalano et al., 2004; Damon, 2004; Gillham et al., 2011). Deviant behavior is one of the five most prevalent factors affecting at-risk youth (Battin-Pearson

et al., 2000; Newcomb et al., 2002), so for this population, spirituality may have an influence on whether these students graduate by providing them with a protective factor to help stave off negative influences and avoid engaging in deviant behavior. Seligman et al. (2009) reviewed a positive psychology program (Positive Education) that was inserted into a parochial school's curriculum. One exercise to strengthen spirituality had students and parents email each other "reflections about what makes life meaningful and purposeful" (p. 305). The emails were prompted with a quotation to help begin the discussion. It is possible that this could be modified and repeated by psychologists or parents by discussing life's meaning and purpose within the bounds of philosophy, using quotes from Socrates to popular music lyrics. This would keep the conversation within the spirit of the character strength but omit the controversy of discussing religion.

Curiosity and Love of Learning

Curiosity and love of learning were among the least mentioned strengths. They have been put together in this section because they were both discussed when the participants were talking about academic material and there is some overlap on how to improve these strengths within this population.

Previous studies have shown that being curious was a strength that positively affected learning (Kashdan & Yuen, 2007; Park & Peterson, 2008). Kashdan and Yuen (2007) found that curiosity "facilitates learning and better academic performance that cannot be attributed to intellectual ability" (p. 260). This study supports these findings as half of the participants stated that the intelligence of a student was not a factor in whether he or she dropped out. The interviews revealed that these students were often curious and interested in learning; however, when academic material frustrated them, if they did not have self-confidence in their abilities,

they easily gave up or did not try. Participants told stories about students that were so afraid of answering questions wrong during class or on exams, they shut down and didn't answer any questions at all; or, sometimes students would get angry if they missed any exam answers because they were afraid of disappointing the teacher, and being viewed as "not smart." This study found that these students were inspired and motivated to connect with the academic material when counselors and teachers helped them experience small successes. According to the participants, often these teens had never felt success before. For example, one teacher worked side by side with a student who was struggling and shut down. Together they focused on getting one question right on an in-class assignment, and the next day two questions right. By creating situations in the classroom where students experienced academic success their desire to learn increased. This also supports Kashdan & Yuen's study where "teachers perceived as supportive of student goal efforts leads to stronger curiosity and competence that independently contribute to greater academic learning" (p. 268).

Another successful approach both the teachers and the counselors in this study used to help engage this population with school material was to change the student's viewpoint on learning. The teachers and counselors administered growth mindset training at the beginning of the year with a cohort of students identified as at risk of dropping out. The students were taught to focus on and develop their learning process by using effort and not regard their intelligence or abilities as static. This program positively changed the attitudes of several students. One of the participants who implemented this program said her students changed their attitude from "I can't do it" to "this is really hard, but I'll work at it."

Seligman et al. (2009) assessed a program that was proven to increase students' engagement with school and improved the strengths of curiosity and love of learning. The

Positive Psychology Programme (PPP) involved adolescents identifying their character strengths and applying them to daily life. The character strengths were discussed by a teacher in class, homework was given and they put reflections in a journal. Two exercise examples were Three Good Things and Using Signature Strengths in a New Way. The first task had the student write down three good things they did each day and write a reflection on each of them. The second task asked the student to use their strongest character strengths as frequently as possible both in and out of school (Seligman et al, 2009). Since this program was proven to show improvement, it appears that the exercises in this character strengths based program would compliment a dropout prevention or intervention program. Parts of this program could easily be implemented at any high school because psychologists, school counselors, or teachers can carry it out. School personnel could replicate these exercises targeting the at-risk population and work with them to identify their strengths and incorporate these strengths into their daily lives.

Vitality

Vitality was also among the least mentioned strengths in the interviews but the participants seemed to feel it was an important strength to have to make it through to graduation. The participants believed the students used vitality to mentally and physically separate themselves from their chaotic lives outside of school and focus throughout the day. Prior research found that vitality provided a protective factor for at-risk youth (Werner, 1990) and was strongly associated with few internalizing problems in adolescents (Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009). Vitality was also linked to greater life satisfaction (Park & Peterson, 2009; Park & Peterson, 2008). Seligman, et al. (2009) summarized several studies and concluded that greater life satisfaction, “produces increases in learning, the traditional goal of education” (pp. 294-295). Since vitality was indicated as a strength of the students who

graduated and previous research identified vitality as having protective benefits my findings raise the possibility that vitality is acting as a protective factor for these adolescents. This indicates that school counselors and psychologists should include activities that promote vitality in a group or individual therapy program for at-risk youth. Unfortunately, no research was found on how to address or enhance this character strength, indicating that future research is necessary to inform clinicians on ways to integrate vitality into a clinical program.

Additional Findings

Humility, gratitude, bravery, social intelligence, and humor were among the top nine character strengths in the surveys that were recognized by school personnel to help at-risk students graduate, but these five strengths were not mentioned in the interviews. This seems unusual as humility had the highest survey mean of 3.88 and bravery, social intelligence, gratitude and humor all had the high mean of 3.63 (see Table 3). It is unclear why humility was rated the most frequently used strength and never mentioned in the interviews. Unfortunately, there is no research on the character strength humility to help provide an answer. In addition, it is interesting that gratitude was not found to be a strength in the interviews since gratitude has been shown to increase students well-being, increase their satisfaction with school (Gillham, et al., 2011), and positively influence academic success (Park & Peterson, 2008). Social intelligence was also not mentioned by the participants but would be a particularly useful strength for this population. It has been shown to reduce deviant behaviors, which is a proven factor related to high school dropout, “and [it] increase[s] the likelihood that youth will graduate from school” (Gillham et al., p. 32). Prior research has also shown that bravery and humor have had a positive impact on illnesses, psychological disorders and trauma (Gillham et al., 2011; Park & Peterson, 2008) so it is possible these two strengths are present and working as protective factors for these

adolescents. Research has shown that gratitude, social intelligence, bravery and humor can all greatly benefit at-risk students throughout their high school career, but this study cannot say with certainty that this population used these strengths to graduate because they were not brought up in the interviews, only in the surveys.

There are two possible reasons why these five strengths had high survey means but were not discussed in the interviews. First, there is the limitation of recall. The second reason may be due to the way a study using IPA is analyzed. In the participants' narratives the students never overtly demonstrated any of these five strengths. The following are examples: no gratitude was given to the participants for their help; the participants never mentioned the students engaging in any form of humor; the teens did not perform acts of humility or bravery; and, they did not show signs of having social intelligence. None of these strengths were discussed in a positive way during the interviews, therefore, due to the analysis method of IPA, the conclusion had to be that these strengths were not employed by these students to graduate. In contrast, the survey allowed the participants to consider their answers and I believe they thought about these teens holistically and applied their opinion to whether these students used these strengths. For example, even though appreciation was not overtly given, upon reflection the participants believed these students were grateful for their help, even though they never heard a thank you. The participants also remembered these teens as being brave, humble and able to positively navigate social situations. As a researcher using IPA, I could not infer or assume from their stories that the students the participants discussed had these strengths, so they were not added to the final character strengths list. However, the survey allowed the participants to reflect and express any underlying feelings about whether the students used these strengths and how often they observed their use.

Without giving the participants a follow-up questionnaire it is difficult to know exactly why there was a discrepancy between the measurements. It is suggested that future research include following-up with the participants to help understand any interview and survey inconsistencies. In addition, research on this subject would benefit by giving particular attention to all five of these strengths to better inform any potential positive psychology program associated with at-risk students and school success.

Finally, one additional result from this study showed a theme that was distinct from the character strengths, called pride. It is clear the students who made it to graduation wanted to feel proud and this was a positive motivator. I suggest keeping this theme in mind when teaching or counseling at-risk students and working on cultivating pride in this population when it is possible.

Overall Impressions and Clinical Implications

This study was designed to see if at-risk students who graduated had similar characteristics as described within positive psychology. Overall, this study showed that they do. Even though the information was gathered from school personnel and not the students themselves, the perceptions of outside observers looking at the phenomenon provided a great deal of value. Most of the stories told about these students were ultimately similar. These adolescents employed many of the same character strengths, and these strengths make sense for this population. It makes sense that an at-risk student who faces daily challenges would develop and foster the nine, identified strengths to help them navigate, and balance, school and life.

The results of this study have implications for interventions with this at-risk population. The resulting information of this study can be used to help psychologists approach dropout prevention programs in a new way, by using character strengths as the foundation of their

programs. Developing prevention and intervention programs based on the nine character strengths might help school counselors and psychologists lower dropout rates in their high schools. For example, an intervention based on hope has already been proven to be successful both individually and with groups (Miller & Nickerson, 2007; Seligman et al., 2009). Teachers, counselors or psychologists could address the students' educational aspirations early on, and follow-up throughout their high school careers. Finding out what a student's school aspirations are could help gauge the student's strengths in hope, persistence, love, love of learning, vitality and curiosity, and initiate a dialogue around any of the nine character strengths that appear weak. Asking about their aspirations also lays a foundation for the student to feel a sense of hope (Suh & Suh, 2007).

For school counselors and psychologists, it appears that enhancing one strength benefits others as well. Implementing programs that improve love (i.e. bonding with others) such as having adults volunteer to spend time one-on-one with this population, benefits two strengths, love of learning and persistence. Curiosity and love of learning also seem to be intertwined with this population suggesting strengthening one through helping students feel success will benefit both. Psychologists could also improve an at-risk youth's perspective and spirituality by focusing discussions around their thoughts on their place in the world. To enhance perspective, conversations can revolve around how they believe they fit into their environment and ensure they feel competent and recognize how to positively interact with the world. To enhance spirituality, psychologists can speak more universally and provide a forum to philosophically discuss what is meaningful and has purpose to them.

Unfortunately, not enough research has been done to identify specific interventions to strengthen each character strength, but with the help of this study psychologists have the tools to

create a plan that will target these strengths either in a group or individual setting. And, as stated earlier, this study purposefully used the VIA classification system, so there is a common language and common definitions among those who create or employ a program.

Another benefit of therapists using character strengths in prevention or intervention programs is that adolescents will not view themselves as having something wrong with them. If their strengths are individually assessed by using the VIA-Youth tool, programs can target working with the students' strengths first, building their self-esteem, and then addressing any less-developed strengths (Park & Peterson, 2008).

Finally, this study was designed to illuminate the strengths of a population that is unique and differs from the general adolescent population. In the field of positive psychology, focusing on subsections of the adolescent population is necessary but presently nonexistent. The field must move beyond focusing on how character strengths improve deficits (e.g., depression) or improve only mainstream adolescents' life satisfaction. It cannot be assumed that a generalized, adolescent intervention program can fulfill the needs of all adolescent cohorts, some of whom are faced with "out of the norm" circumstances.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by several factors. First, there are limitations to using IPA. This method uses a participant's personal account of the phenomenon, and in this case, their perception of the strengths of at-risk students who graduated. Since this is the individual's personal recollection, it is impossible to know everything the participant experienced, and moreover, the accuracy of their memories or what biases may influence their answers (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In addition, both readers needed to be aware of our biases before, during, and after the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003). We have both worked at an

urban high school and with adolescents, and needed to be aware of any preconceived notions so they did not interfere with either the interviews or our analysis of them. Also, both readers are familiar with positive psychology, which may have biased the reading of the transcripts and noting specific themes.

The survey also had limitations. Each participant may have had a different view of how often “always,” “usually,” “half the time,” “not often” and “never” were. In this scenario, it was not possible to exactly quantify how many instances each frequency represented, so it was possible there were discrepancies among the participants’ answers. Another possible limitation was that a participant could have assumed that the strength must have been present in order for the students to reach their goal, and could have answered “always” or “usually” to a question, whether it was true or not.

Other limitations included having a small sample size, and the sample came from one high school. Also, participants stated they had many more stories, but the stories were not told due to time limits, so the results are limited. More stories could have strengthened the findings of this study.

Also, I originally hoped to speak directly to students who graduated, but due to circumstances at the the school, I modified the study from a direct assessment, to interviewing counselors and teachers, obtaining staff experiences instead of hearing from the students themselves. The results from students may have differed from those of the staff members.

Suggestions for Future Research

In the future, a direct assessment and structured interview of at-risk students who graduated should be done and compared to the results of this study. This study has shown a discrepancy between the interview and survey results from the outside observers’ perspective;

so, it would be interesting to note if the same discrepancy occurs when studying the students directly.

Also, further research should include a prospective longitudinal study of this population throughout high school. The study could give the VIA-Youth to at-risk students at the beginning of 9th grade, and then give it again to both the graduates, and the dropouts of that cohort. In addition, a structured interview could be given to both the graduates, and the dropouts, of the same cohort to further augment the results. Furthermore, if any discrepancies are seen between the results of the surveys and the results of the interviews, the researcher can talk to the participants and explore the reasons for the differences.

Future research could also include studies of interventions for this population that combines character strengths based, positive psychology programs, with traditional programs, already proven to improve dropout rates. It would be interesting to learn if a combined program lowers the dropout rate.

Future research could study whether having these particular character strengths gave these students the capacity to overcome the obstacles they faced to graduate, or whether something else was involved. For example, was increased self-esteem also involved? Did their life satisfaction change at some point? Or, was it just having these character strengths that gave them the internal drive and ability to overcome life's hurdles to succeed?

Finally, there is so little research on adolescents, positive psychology and character strengths, simply repeating this study with a greater number of participants would yield valuable information.

Conclusion

Millions of adolescents dropout of school each year, which has a profound affect on the lives of these individuals and on society. Dropouts are faced with lower lifetime income and an increased likelihood of engaging in both deviant and criminal behaviors. In addition, dropouts place a strain on society due to an increased need for social services. This study's purpose was to look at this dilemma using positive psychology to augment previous research to help inform future dropout prevention and intervention programs. Positive psychology programs are relatively new, but have proven successful in improving the lives of adults and youth. However, prior to this study, no one has looked specifically at students at risk of dropping out from a positive psychology perspective. This study found that school counselors and teachers believe that students who graduate from high school despite being considered for dropping out, have unique character strengths that help them achieve school success and graduate. Since we now know which strengths seem to positively impact this population, school personnel should consider implementing and evaluating a positive psychology dropout intervention program to explore whether this approach actually decreases dropout rates.

This study revealed that school personnel frequently mentioned 9 of the 24 character strengths as helping students at risk of dropping out make it to graduation. Programs designed to target these nine strengths (love, persistence, integrity, perspective, hope, spirituality, curiosity, love of learning, and vitality) may help at-risk students improve these strengths which in turn may have an impact on their school success, as well as improve their abilities to interact socially and with their environment. Strengthening these nine strengths may help psychologists lower the dropout rates of high schools in which they work. Studies have shown that character strengths can be learned and enhanced (Gillham et al., 2011). Also, for school counselors and

psychologists, it appears that enhancing one strength can have a positive effect on other strengths. This study indicated that the most predominant strength that needs to be addressed and enhanced in any intervention program is “love.” Love’s definition is “valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). This study found that having a connection with a caring adult is crucial for these students to achieve academic success, and positively affects other strengths as well. There are programs psychologists can implement to strengthen love, for example, pairing at-risk students with mentors, such as school personnel volunteers. Implementing one-on-one volunteer programs can have the residual affect of strengthening persistence, and help the student have the stamina not to give up. Another strong message school professionals can take away from this study is to work with these students to help them experience continual successes, no matter how small. Success experiences improve the strengths “curiosity” and “love of learning,” and have been shown to reinvigorate the desire of an at-risk student to engage with academic material and ultimately experience school success.

As psychologists, we have the potential to address the high drop-out rate, and using the strengths identified by positive psychology may give these students a greater chance to succeed both in school and in life.

All young people want to do well with their lives and live a happy and fulfilling life. It is a fundamental human desire and right. No matter how they act and what they say, there are no children or youth who truly do not desire to do well at school, in relationships, at home, and in society. But more often than not, young people do not know how to find happiness and meaning in the right place and in the right way. Perhaps, identifying

character strengths is where we can start. Everyone has strengths. They need to be recognized, celebrated, strengthened, and used. (Park & Peterson, 2008, p. 91)

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Appendix A

Student Strengths Survey

The overall goal of this study is to see whether at-risk students who do not dropout, but graduate high school instead, have similar strengths. This survey will be used to determine how often you believe at-risk students, who graduated, used the strengths I am asking you about. Your anonymity will be maintained and your answers will remain confidential.

Please read each question carefully. I want you to answer each question keeping only the at-risk students you know that graduated in mind. There are 24 questions, and each question asks about a different characteristic. Please circle the appropriate response.

1. How often did these students show CREATIVITY? For example, how often did they do something that was original or innovative?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

2. How often did these students show CURIOSITY? For example, how often did they explore something new or were open to new experiences?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

3. How often did these students show OPEN-MINDEDNESS? For example, how often did they think things through and not jump to conclusions, or change their minds in light of evidence?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

4. How often did these students show LOVE OF LEARNING? For example, how often did they try to master new skills or try to learn more about some topic?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

5. How often did these students show PERSPECTIVE or WISDOM? For example, how often did they offer wise advice to others in need of it?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

6. How often did these students show COURAGE or BRAVERY? For example, how often did they face up to verbal or physical threats with braveness, or spoke up for what was right, even when it was unpopular?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

7. How often did these students show PERSISTENCE or INDUSTRIOUSNESS? For example, how often did they persevere and finish what they started, even when faced with a difficult and time-consuming task?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

8. How often did these students show HONESTY and INTEGRITY? For example, how often did they present themselves and/or situations in a genuine way?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

9. How often did these students show VITALITY? For example, how often did they approach life with excitement and energy?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

10. How often did these students show LOVE or ATTACHMENT? For example, to friends or family members when it was possible to do so?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

11. How often did these students show KINDNESS or GENEROSITY? For example, how often did they help others?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

12. How often did these students show SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE or SOCIAL SKILLS? For example, how often were they able to navigate different social situations or understand what “makes other people tick?”

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

13. How often did these students show TEAMWORK? For example, how often did they work well as a member of a group?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

14. How often did these students show FAIRNESS? For example, how often did they give everyone a fair chance?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

15. How often did these students show LEADERSHIP? For example, how often did they encourage a group they were a member of to get things done, while maintaining good relations within the group?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

16. How often did these students show FORGIVENESS and MERCY? For example, how often did they forgive others and not be vengeful?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

17. How often did these students show HUMILITY or MODESTY? For example, how often did they let their accomplishments speak for themselves and not regard themselves as more special than they are?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

18. How often did these students show PRUDENCE? For example, how often did they show discretion or caution when tempted to do something they might regret later?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

19. How often did these students show SELF-REGULATION? For example, how often were they able to be disciplined and show self-control?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

20. How often did these students show APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY AND EXCELLENCE? For example, how often did they notice and appreciate beauty,

excellence, and/or skilled performances in subject matters from nature, to art, to science to everyday experiences?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

21. How often did these students show GRATITUDE? For example, how often did they show thankfulness for good things that happened to them, and also express their thanks?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

22. How often did these students show HOPE or OPTIMISM? For example, how often did they continue to expect the best, even after experiencing failure or a setback?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

23. How often did these students show HUMOR or PLAYFULNESS? For example, how often did they like to laugh, see the light side of things and make others smile?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

24. How often did these students show SPIRITUALITY? For example, how often did they show religiousness or faith or a belief in a higher purpose?

Always Usually Half the time Not often Never

Appendix B

Themes and Corresponding Quotes

Theme	Quote
Curiosity	"...the kids would often be curious and often did want to actually learn things..."
Interested in learning	"So for her it was a couple things. Genuine interest in learning. She was a smart, interested kid."
Perspective	Referring to his drug dealing brother, a student told the participant, "I am not going to go down the route that my older brother went down. My older brother was smart, he chose that life, I'm choosing a different life in spite of him."
Strong sense of self	"I think a strong sense of self, I've seen in most of them. That they really had the capacity to know, this isn't the real them, the real them is someone that is successful."
Externalizes negative factors	"They've had this idea that things are supposed to be better, that they and everyone around them should be figuring out how to help them get things to the way they are supposed to be."
Persistence/perseverance	"So, what I have seen of kids who were able to overcome, was this unbelievable, certainly stranger than I ever thought of myself...unbelievable ability to persevere."
Inner drive and motivation to succeed	"...the thing that changed for her, she found her own internal motivation. She realized why it was good for her to do well, so was finally able to separate from everybody telling her what to do, she started seeing the inherent value in doing what she needed to do for herself..."
Being passionate about something	"She is now going to school because she wants to help others and become a nutritionist. She has a passion."

Has experienced success	“...when they get the taste of success, even if it’s small, then they get a glimmer that they can do it. That if they work hard and try hard, even if there’s levels of failure, there’s levels of success, so they keep pushing through.”
Resilience	“When they leave the school, there’s just mayhem in their lives. Like complete dysfunction...It runs the gammit but every last kid has a story that I am like, ‘what the?’ How do they do it? And they do. They are super resilient.”
Hard working	“So the student that started out not attending high school at all freshman year and is now doing all these things, she clearly is having a growth mindset...It’s not that I can’t do this, but it’s really hard and I am going to have to put a lot of effort into this. And they will.”
Goal-oriented	“He wanted to walk across the stage. He wanted that moment. So I think there had to be that desire inside to have, there had to be something that they are working towards. So that made, I think made a difference.”
Make good decisions despite adversity	“They were in these extreme circumstances and were doing some really amazing things in spite of it, and they didn’t get that. So when we were working on their college essays or personal writing they didn’t really see how amazing it was that they were making these decisions going through school.”
Being a good role model & Feeling of responsibility for others	“Some of my conversations with him were that he’s the oldest child and his younger siblings look up to him, and that it really matters what he does. And, I think he felt that way, and he felt responsible anyway, and while I personally don’t want him to feel like the adult in the family, I think that he said, in a way he set a good example.”

Maturity	“And I think he wanted to be like, I did it. I didn’t give up. I’ve come this far. I can’t throw in the towel now. And, I think there was a level of maturity...”
Having a sense of control	“So, he really had the example, and saw, I can do well, and not choose that path. He really saw it as a choice.”
Energetic	“I think, energy. Like for most of these kids they’ve somehow had the energy to have things go really badly, and been really exhausted, but they turned it around.”
Not settling	“So, rather than just coming to school now, and passing her classes and getting her homework done, now its about getting an ‘A’.”
Sense of belonging	“What makes these kids succeed and graduate despite being at risk of dropping out? I think it has a lot to do with having a place where they have a sense of community, having a sense of belonging, peers that accept them.”
Has positive peer relationships	“I think having a peer network is really important. In fact, he’s had other challenges, and they’ve helped him...and having that peer support, because we aren’t there on a day-to-day basis...”
Has positive relationships with adults	“Each kid will have at least one significant relationship with at least one adult. Which most of our kids have, and relationships with lots of adults.”
Ability to form positive relationships	“The ability to have a relationship with somebody. Whether it be a teacher or a counselor or even their classmates, but the ability to have relationships with others.”
Has family support	“The students who don’t drop out have parental support.”
Has a strong supplemental support system	“So, we have definitely had kids in that realm, where they looked like they were completely off track, they weren’t getting any credits, they seemed like they were a mess and

were eventually able to turn things around because of all of those supplemental supports the school had.”

Willing to ask for help	“Always asking for help, the ones that end up doing well. Um, and really using that help.”
Hope/optimism	“I think they’ve had a belief that things are supposed to be better. Like the stuff that’s going wrong is wrong. They haven’t believed that this is what I deserve, it’s what it’s supposed to be, or, this is the most I can do, or this is the most I can expect.”
Spirituality	“I see a consistency being having some kind of faith in a higher power.”
Cares what others think	“I think they had to care what other people thought, even though they pretended not to.”
Desire to make others proud	“There are a couple of people he really wanted to make proud. He really wanted to make his dad proud. He really wanted to make me proud.”
Pride in oneself	“...they think, ‘I did it,’ and they really want their friends to feel that. So, it’s like, getting any of our kids to succeed can have a greater impact because they are going to help other kids...I’m like ‘why don’t we teach this person that’ and they feel really good about it and it expands from a couple of kids who know something, to more kids that know stuff.”