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# Project B.L.A.S.T (Breaking Barriers, Loving Yourself, Accepting Others, Similarities not Differences, Totally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools

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*Project B.L.A.S.T (**B**reaking Barriers, **L**oving Yourself, **A**ccepting Others, **S**imilarities not Differences, **T**otally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools*

by
**Kelli Lynn Sirianni**

A Thesis
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2014

*Project B.L.A.S.T (**B**reaking Barriers, **L**oving Yourself, **A**ccepting Others, **S**imilarities not Differences, **T**otally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the one-day event, *Project B.L.A.S.T.*, and its impact on student and

adult participants, intrinsically and extrinsically. Former participants in the event were

recruited on a volunteer basis, and were interviewed on the impact this event had on them, as

well as the perceptive impact it had on others. Using a qualitative approach, thematic

analysis, was used to draw conclusions about impact and perceived impact, as well as short

and long-term implications. *Project B.L.A.S.T.* stands for: breaking barriers, loving yourself,

accepting others, similarities not differences, and totally inclusive experience. It is a

proactive approach to adversity faced by 21$^{st}$ century youth, and an eye-opening experience

for all. The development of resiliency is crucial to one's ability to develop into a socially

competent citizen, and must be a primary focus of our current education system if youth are

expected to demonstrate personal and social responsibility, and transfer these skills when out

in the real world. With heightened risk factors of the 21$^{st}$ century, continuous efforts must be

made to alleviate that which impedes youth's academic, social, personal, emotional and

psychological potential, competency and success.

*Keywords:* empathy, compassion, acceptance, respect, resilience, sense of belonging,

student climate, *Project BLAST*

DEDICATION


Most importantly, I dedicate my thesis to my parents. My mom who showed me love must permeate all you do, and my dad, who taught me the value of commitment, hard work and perseverance. Above all, you have both taught me the power of believing in myself.

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I would also like to thank the various high schools that hosted a *Project BLAST* event. Thank you for your support in doing so. As well as those who have experienced an event with me, whether student or adult, thank you.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/SYMBOLS

*Project BLAST*    *Breaking Barriers; Loving Yourself; Accepting Others; Similarities not Differences; Totally Inclusive Experience*

*SES*    *Socioeconomic Status*

*PD*    *Primary Data*

*SD*    *Secondary Data*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

**Critical Issues Faced by Today's Adolescents**

Although childhood and adolescence have always been characterized by upheaval, youth of the 21$^{st}$ century are facing a new array of critical issues as a result of our ever-changing society. These issues are "problematic singularly and in conjunction with academically, behaviorally, and emotionally involved students" (Crockett, 2003, p. 451). These critical issues include, but are not exclusive to: education and drop out rates, violence and victimization, bullying and harassment, stigma and the gay community, teen pregnancy and sexual behaviour, technology and social media, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, suicide, and diversity and tolerance.

If an individual's basic needs are not fulfilled, this individual cannot be expected to want to, or be able to, extend him or herself in the world of education and learning. Basic needs can be thought of in a physiological sense, such as nutrition, shelter, hygiene and healthcare, as well as in a spiritual, self-actualized sense, such as respect, dignity, acceptance, achievement and sense of security. In Maslow's (1970) Hierarchy of Needs Theory, an individual's needs are arranged in the form of a hierarchy, with the lower-level being physiological needs and the high level pertaining to self-actualization. The 'lower', physiological needs are actually the highest priority, because until they are reasonably satisfied, the other higher-level needs cannot be fulfilled, and therefore, will not emerge to motivate behavior. In this case, high-level needs and behaviour can be thought of as one's ability to engage in the social world, including that of education. Most, if not all of these critical issues, are interconnected, with many of these critical issues having a cause/effect

relationship. Responding to challenges of adolescence through modes of social support, special education and academic assistance increases the potential for these students to seek and gain access to the services needed to reach self-actualization. In order for one to acquire self-actualization, one must possess internal resilience, as well as an external sense of belonging. These two factors work together in creating a holistically healthy individual.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived impact of the event, *Project BLAST*, on student resilience and sense of belonging, according to adults who have participated in the event at least once. These adult study participants include individuals who are teachers, Faculty of Education teacher candidates and graduates, current or past students from other faculties of study, and volunteers from the community, aged 18 and older. These participants have fulfilled one or more of the following roles in a *BLAST* event: adult facilitator, student participant and/or student facilitator.

By aiming to identify aspects of student culture and social roles, barriers that interfere with healthy relations can be broken and the building of resilience can and should ensue. Ideally, to build resilience in students, focus should be placed on the following three areas: (i) creating a caring and supportive environment; (ii) high expectations for each individual and support to achieve them, and (iii) opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways (Benard, 1991, p. 10).

A sense of belonging is fostered through interactions within the social, academic and professional spheres of a student's experience (Parkes, 2014). According to Parkes (2014), a sense of student belonging can be achieved through: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing knowledge, confidence and identity as

successful learners; and the opportunity for educational experiences relevant to students' interests and future goals.  Goodenow & Grady (1993) demonstrated an association between students' psychological sense of membership and motivation outcomes. Furthermore, school belongingness was found to heavily influence general school motivation, expectancy for success and the value that students attributed to their academic work.

*BLAST* assumes to collectively target these resilience and sense of belonging-building factors, through the program's open and honest nature. The highly structured nature of the event, and the strategic order of activity, prompts participants to engage throughout the day. By creating a safe, supportive environment, all participants are encouraged and inclined to fully partake in the activities of the day, and as a result should experience mutual respect, empathy and compassion/acceptance. This study investigates the reality of these assumptions according to adults who have participated in the event, as well as evaluative feedback forms completed by student participants after each event.

**Research Question(s)**

In previous executions of this event, it has appeared that participants have experienced a strong short-term impact. This study seeks to interpret adult perceptions post-event, in hopes of exploring its perceived effectiveness and impact, on both a short-term and potential long-term basis. In addition, the study will attempt to use evaluative feedback forms, serving as student voice, as a way of supporting perceptions of adults.

The research questions for this study include the following: (1) What perceived impact does *BLAST* have on resilience, sense of belonging, and overall student climate according to adult participants? (2) What are the short and long-term implications of this event as perceived by adult participants? (3) What impact does this event have on adult

participants? (4) What changes should be implemented in this program to achieve betterment, and hence heightened success, in its future executions?

These research questions have been asked in relation to *BLAST* events that have been brought into various secondary schools, at the request of the school administration. The adult research participants have been selected from the group of individuals who have been involved with *BLAST* as a facilitator within the last 3 school years.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**The Purpose of Education**

Whitehead (1927) described only one subject matter that should come from education: "Life in all its manifestations" (p. 7); the ability to live as a productive member of society in all of its facets. Dewey (1959) refers to education as a, "process of living," (p. 77) as a representation of present life. In "My Pedagogic Creed," Dewey (1959) reveals two sides of the educational process, the psychological and the sociological. With the psychological as the basis, it is only with the development of a child's instincts and powers that he or she can be made into a productive member of society, an individual who participates as an informed, socially competent citizen. Hence, education is simply an extended form of community life (Dewey, 1959).

In the words of Rousseau, the ultimate aim of education is to produce the, "best possible man" (Noddings, 2009, p. 430). Rousseau recognizes that we as individuals live in association to others, and therefore, education must work towards developing us as individuals and citizens. Bandura's Social Cognition Theory (1986; 1989; 1997) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978; 1980) support learning 'in association to others', both contending that 'people learn from other people'. Rousseau cites characteristics such as the ability to think independently, becoming models of civic virtue, and the understanding and practice of justice as outcomes of education (Noddings, 2009). These attributes, among others, can be deemed exemplary of citizenship.

**Citizenship**. A citizen can be defined as, "a person having duties, rights, responsibilities, and privileges within a political unit that demands loyalty from that person and extends protection in return" (McIntosh, 2005, p. 385). In a social sense, a global citizen possesses, "habits of mind, heart, body, and soul that have to do with working for and preserving a network of relationships and connections across lines of difference and distinctness, while keeping and deepening a sense of one's own identity and integrity" (McIntosh, 2005, p. 385). Miller (as cited in McIntosh, 2005) attributes one's attainment of global citizenship to, "finding one's development through the development of others" (p. 387). This notion is again, supported by Bandura's Social Cognitive (1986; 1989; 1997) and Vygotsky's (1978; 1980) Sociocultural Theories. Furthermore, McIntosh describes good citizenship as the ability and capacity to enact the following:

(i) To respect one's own feelings and delve deeply into them;

(ii) To become aware of others' feelings and to believe in the validity

of those feelings;

(iii) To experience in oneself a mixture of conflicting feelings without

losing a sense of integrity;

(iv) To experience affective worlds plurally while keeping a

gyroscopic sense of one's core orientations;

(v) To wish competing parties well;

(vi) To observe and understand how the "politics of location" affect

one's own and others' positions and power in the world, and;

(vii) To balance being heartfelt with a felt knowledge of how culture is

embedded in the hearts of ourselves and other (p.386).

According to McIntosh (2005), "the ethos of global citizenship […] must start with providing, and caring about providing, these basic human necessities" (p. 388). These 'basic human necessities' include freedom, dignity, equity, actual and perceived safety, respect and compassion/acceptance. In order to build compassionate, empathic citizens, equipped with problem solving, communication and critical thinking skills, there must be exposure to the lived experiences of others. In order for experiences to be shared, a safe, inclusive, supportive environment, that approaches education from a holistic standpoint, is essential.

**Resilience**

Resilience, rooted in the Latin word *resilire* meaning "to bounce back," refers to one's capacity to return to good mental health after encountering challenging and difficult situations (Hurlington, 2010, p. 1). Resiliency is, "the process of coping with adversity, change, or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors" (Richardson, 2002, p. 308). In simple terms, a resilient child is one who is able to succeed and have positive outcomes despite adversity (Crocker, 2000). The building and practice of resilience is a dynamic process where one can positively adapt in the context of significant adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). It is a developmental process, whereby successful experiences in overcoming adverse situations can increase self-efficacy and confidence in one's ability to competently interact with the environment (Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009). Likewise, a resilient youth is one who is able to successfully confront, and negotiate, a multitude of challenges, while effectively coping with obstacles, barriers and setbacks" (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). Resilience "reveals a youth's capacity to retain equilibrium after encountering substantial adversity" (Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009, p. 215). Despite difficulties one may encounter,

those who are resilient are able to perseverate because despite challenge, they do not experience a sense of defeat or hopelessness (D'Oyley, Kakembo, McFarlane, Perry, Andruska, & George, 2001). Braff, Ellis, and Hutchinson (2001) cite the follow characteristics as that of resilient youth: social competence; good problem-solving skills; good self-control; positive relationship with a caregiver or significant adult; ability to accept life's challenges; autonomy; a sense of purpose/belief in a bright future; a sense of belonging, and; ability to positively contribute to the community (p. 312).

   **Theories of Resiliency**. There are a variety of long-standing controversies over the definition of resilience; it is not yet clear if resilience is inherent to the child, or a balance between protective and risk factors (Crocker, 2000). In this light, resilience can be thought of as an outcome of risk(s) versus vulnerability (Trudel & Puentes-Newman, 2000), both of which stand in opposition to protective factors. Vulnerability is thought of as characteristics or circumstances that predispose a child to problems in adaptability (Trudel & Puentes-Newman, 2000). On the other hand, researchers distinguish risk factors from vulnerability by associating risk with environmental influences, and associating vulnerability with the child (Trudel & Puentes-Newman, 2000). Trudel and Puentes-Neuman (2000) contend that risk factors are part of the social environment or socioeconomic condition of the family, or even as characteristics of the family itself or as characteristics of the child. Such characteristics that predispose the child to a negative outcome, in turn become a risk itself. Regardless of theory, it can be said that vulnerability and risk factors are interconnected and impede one's resilience, both of which having the potential for negative outcomes. Protective factors on the other hand have the ability to contribute to resilience and offset these risk and vulnerability factors. Contrary to vulnerability and risk factors, to possess resilience is to adapt despite the

presence of these factors (Braff et al., 2001). Moreover, it is also the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

*Risk Factors.* Risk should be viewed along a continuum, as it is "multidimensional, interactive, multileveled and systematic" (Crocker, 2000, p. 9). According to Romer (2003), risk is a collection of factors, including behaviors that can predict poor mental and physical health outcomes. Risk factors are hazards or threats that increase vulnerability or susceptibility to negative developmental or health outcomes (Wang, Hsu, Lin, & Cheng, & Lee, 2010). Kirby and Fraser (1997) identify the following factors as influential to risk: genetic, biological, behavioural, sociocultural, and demographic conditions, characteristics or attributes. Environmental risk factors have also been found to influence adolescent risk behaviours (Millstein & Ingra, 1995), and may include: poverty, peer and parental risk behaviours, and the erosion of adolescents' familial and social support networks.

The nature and timing of risk factors may differentiate from individual to individual, and can be heightened during periods of transition (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). School is a context that can provide critical, but often overlook, influence on the sphere of risk, in both a positive and negative sense. If a school environment is warm, welcoming, and accepting, it can prompt students in a way that allows risk to be overcome; if it is judgmental, rigid, and dehumanized, it can increase the number of risk factors in a young adult's life. Risk factors can lead to a child being defined as 'in-risk.'

*'In-Risk' Youth.* Individuals who lack resiliency skills are often classified as being 'in or at-risk,' meaning that they are vulnerable to "a set of characteristics or circumstances, which predispose[s] an individual to manifest problems in adaption" (Crocker, 2000, p. 7). This 'set of characteristics or circumstances' are referred to as risk factors. Risk factors can

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be viewed as internal or external, such as the innate vulnerability of the individual, or the family and environmental context to which the individual is exposed. According to Romer (2003), risk is a collection of factors, including behaviors that can predict poor mental and physical health outcomes. Risk factors are hazards or threats that increase vulnerability or susceptibility to negative developmental or health outcomes (Wang, et al., 2010).

Trudel and Puentes-Neuman (2000) consider an in or at risk youth as having difficulty attaining or sustaining healthy personal and social development. When one is defined as being 'in-risk, it can mean that they are facing personal developmental problems as a consequence of individual concerns, family status, or difficulties and/or peer, school, and community factors" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 324).  In the context of education, this can mean that this individual is 'in-risk' of not completing high school. Lupart (2000) points out that individuals with disabilities and exceptional needs are less likely to succeed in school and to fully participate in societal life, therefore limiting their employment opportunities and falling under the category of in risk. Wotherspoon and Schiseel (2001) also cite those who are visible minorities, children from lower SES families, and those whose English is a second language, are accountable for large portion of the at-risk population. This development can also be seen in an intrinsic sense, in regards to self-esteem, efficacy, direction, and behaviour regulation, and/or in an extrinsic sense, in regards to problem-solving, communication skills, development of a sense of belonging/community, and the ability to socially interact or engage as part of a collective or team. As stated above, in or at risk refers to not only academic related issues, but also the very core development of an individual, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

Campbell, the Director General of the Social Policy and Programs Branch and Director General of the Governance Statistical Initiative at the Department of Indian and Northern affairs, highlighted the following questions that educators and policy makers should be asking (D'Oyley et al., 2001): (1) Are children at risk because they do not conform or because they have difficulty attaining established societal standards? (2) Are children at risk because society does not recognize the standards and values of minority populations? (3) Can a common goal for education be found without crossing the line of cultural assimilation? (p. 22).

As mentioned, vulnerability is closely associated with risk; to be 'in risk' is to be in perhaps a state of uncertainty, and vulnerability. Terrisse (2000) defines vulnerability as "the predisposition of a child to develop learning and coping difficulties as he/she grows up" (p. 2). With that said, it is important to remember that many, if not all children, who are exposed to unfavorable environments or predispositions experience difficulties socially, academically, or otherwise. This is where the concept of resilience comes into play, as well as protective factors. Both risk and protective factors occur over time and reside in the individual and family characteristics. These factors are also found in one's societal environment, such as schools and other institutions. The factors within each have a cumulative effect (Terrisse, 2000).

***Protective Factors.*** Protective factors, or developmental assets, are associated with a low or lessening risk for the maladjusted behaviour (Trudel et al., 2000). Protective factors are characteristics of either the child, or of the environment, that may counter or limit the impact and effect of risk factors, particularly when the child is placed in a challenging situation (Terrisse, 2000). Protective factors can either contribute to resilience, or can be a

result of resilience. Resilience and protective factors are two components that go hand in hand.

Protective factors enhance adolescents' ability to resist stressful life events, while adapting to the situation and developing competence in dealing with it.  From an internal perspective, protective factors can include self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-regulation, as well as conflict resolution skills, planning, problem-solving, academic skills (Weisz & Stipek, 1982) and participation in extracurricular and community activities (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson & Spicer, 2006). From an external perspective, protective factors can include positive opportunities provided by adults in family, school, and the larger community, as well as family communication, peer role models, and non-parental role models (Oman, McLeroy, Vesley, Aspy, Smith & Penn, 2002a; Oman, Vesley, McLeroy, Harris-Wyatt, Aspy, Rodine & Marshall, 2002b). Mentorship, for example, provides youth with the following pro-motive assets: a sense of belonging, increased self-esteem by allowing the adolescent to be heard and affirmed through 'choices and voices', and effective communication skills that enable youth to establish both meaningful connections and interpersonal relationships (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001; Martinek, McLaughlin & Schilling, 1999; Scales, Benson & Mannes, 2006).  Furthermore, a successful relationship between mentor and student enables the individual being mentored to learn and grow in a safe and protected environment (Holloway & Salinitri, 2010), hence, to develop resilience and a sense of belonging and purpose.

Protective factors are selective strengths that assist individuals in surviving and overcoming adversity (Richardson, 2002), and work contrary to risk and vulnerability factors. According to research by Benard (1991), as well as Hurlington (2010), there are

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three protective factors that are essential to the building of resiliency: (1) caring relationships; (2) high expectations and; (3) opportunities for meaningful contribution.

*Caring relationships* can help to nurture positive development of children through their demonstration of care and support in practical and palpable ways. It is important for these relationships to acknowledge strengths within the individual, and to then build on them (Hurlington, 2010). In an inclusive classroom, caring relationships can be found from teacher to student, student to teacher, student to student. These relationships should both promote and demonstrate to all members of the classroom that there is a need to respect and appreciate each individual for his or her differences, including strengths and challenges. As mentioned, a meaningful relationship with a teacher is considered an important asset that enhances opportunity for positive developmental outcomes, including an overall improved quality of life (Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009).

*High expectations* refer to student performance and behaviour, in both an academic and social sense. They are essential in helping students to come to the understanding that each possess the capacity to be successful (Hurlington, 2010). Furthermore, boundaries are clearly stated and resources readily available. If high expectations are held amongst the group, all members will be more likely to act within stated criteria.

Lastly, students must be provided multiple and varied *opportunities for meaningful participation*, to demonstrate abilities in real-world settings, and as a result, experience the rewards that come from this type of meaningful involvement (Hurlington, 2010). It is vital for students to be given opportunity to excel and actively participate as members of education in ways unique and meaningful to each individual. This may take shape as activities that target various learning styles, opportunities to participate in assessment and evaluation,

concrete resources that can assist in learning, or meaningful ways to contribute personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. In an inclusive classroom, skills learnt in the midst of classroom interaction, such as communication and problem-solving skills, can be translated into real-world applications, thus, making each individual a positive contribution to any community. Lawy and Biesta (2006) also support this claim, contending the teachings and practices of citizenship and the like help young adults in recognizing the act and value of citizenship, as well as how these influence and can transform the individual overtime.

All three of these factors not only build resilience, but are also components of a sense of belonging. Here, literature asserts that to possess resilience, one must possess sense of belonging, and visa versa. Given that a sense of belonging is a social process, the theoretical frameworks most applicable to this study include Bandura's Social Cognition Theory (1986; 1989; 1997, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978; 1980).

**Sense of Belonging**

Gusfield (1975) distinguishes the two types of community that exist: i) the territorial and geographical notion of community, such as cities, towns and neighbourshood, and; ii) the relational notion of community. The relational notion of community refers to, "the quality of character of human relationship without reference to location" (Gusfield, 1975, p. 8). Specific to education, sense of belonging can also be defined as, "the extent to which student feel personally accepted, respects, included and support in the school environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Ahlbrant and Cunningham (1979) spoke of sense of community as being an integral component in one's commitment to a neighbourhood, or in this case, a school, and satisfaction with it. For a student to be committed to his/her school, as well as their role as a student, he/she must feel a sense of belonging within the school community.

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When students feel capable, they can be thought of as feeling empowered. Empowering students teaches and assists them in reaching their full potential, and should be a focal point for all educators. This process of empowerment that can arise from the development of community is identified by Chavis (1983) and supported by Glynn (1981), who also identifies the relationship between sense of community and an individual's ability to function competently within this community. Here, the interwoven relationship between feeling competent, feeling empowered and feeling a membership within a community is evident. Furthermore, Goodenow (1992) found that a student's subjective sense of belonging appears to have a significant impact on several measures of motivation and on engaged and persistent effort in difficult academic work. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify four elements required to build a sense of belonging and community: i) membership; ii) influence; iii) integration and fulfillment of needs, and; iv) shared emotional connection (p. 9).

*Membership* is defined as the feeling of belonging or of a shared sense of personal relatedness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This can include investing oneself in the group as a member, feeling as though there is a right to belong, and emotional safety. These variables, among others, are necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed, and for intimacy to develop (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

*Influence* can be thought of as a sense of mattering, or of making a difference to a group, and of the group mattering to its members. There must be a cohesiveness that exists within the group in order for influence to be able to take place (Kelley & Wooddruff, 1956). Contributing to this group cohesiveness, is "consensual validation" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 11) of each member's place in the group, as well as the experiences that make them who they are as a person, as background for what this individual needs as a member of this

community, as well as what this individual has to offer this community. This in turn emphasizes the importance of developing a community that appreciates individual differences. Consensual validation is transactional in its relationship with sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

*Integration and fulfillment of needs* refer to the feeling that members' needs will be taken into consideration, by being met by resources received through their membership in the group. Put into ordinary terms, this is the process of reinforcement as a motivator of behaviour. In order for an individual's group association to be rewarding for its members, the group must acquire and maintain a positive sense of togetherness. That which the group requires largely depends on the shared values of its members. In the case of a high school, members of this school community have goals similar by way of learning and academic achievement, essentially all working toward receiving class credits and a high school diploma. In addition, these students are all in the stage of adolescence, characterized by various changes that are physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual. Likewise, the teachers at this school are working toward helping these students fulfill these goals, and are there with the students' best interest in mind. Groups with a sense of community work together to find a way to fit people together so that people meet the needs of others while meeting their own needs (Riley, 1970). Goodenow and Grady (1993) state that if a student believes that others in the school wish them success and are willing to help them achieve it, they are more likely to believe that they in fact do have potential for success and the resources necessary to obtain it.

Lastly, *a shared emotional connection* is the commitment and the belief that members have shared, and will share, history, common places, time together, and similar experiences.

A shared connection is largely based on having had the group members participate in one's personal history, and more importantly, that they can identify with it (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Maslow (1962) states that one's need to belong must be satisfied before other needs can be fulfilled. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) "belongingness hypothesis" contends that individuals seek relationships from a variety of sources, which include family, peers and schools, in order to meet the need for a sense of attachment or connection with others. Finn's (1989) identification-participation model indicates that unless a student is able to identify with his/her school (i.e. feeling welcomed, respect, and valued), participation in education will be limited. If one feels as though he or she does not belong, and is not appreciated or accepted in the school community, this student is unable to fully extend and express him or herself in the realm of learning and education. When sense of belonging is fulfilled, it is associated with increased academic motivation and performance, and a healthier psychological functioning (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). For example, 'making mistakes' is a vital component of learning. If one is too uncomfortable or afraid to make these mistakes, to experiment with trial and error, for fear of being ostracized or victimized, one cannot grow and learn; this individual is being robbed of the right to education. Combs (1982) states that one's success as an individual and as a student is depended on four highly affective variables, one of which is a sense of belonging. A number of case studies have indicated that lacking sense of belonging can be a direct cause of dropping out of high school (Fine, 1991). In a 1992 study by Schlosser, data showed that teachers who emphasized a sense of belonging in their classroom, versus those who did not, were more likely to have students that accept their teachers' educational values and to continue school. Researchers have demonstrated that

students' sense of belonging to school was influenced by characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and SES status, as well as situational and contextual factors including school organizational practices, discipline codes, and student-teacher interactions (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). Research needs to continue developing the most effective avenues schools to create and sustain a positive environment that will foster productive qualities and growth in each student, whether this is for the purposes of anti-bullying, increased academic success, or overall personal well-being.

Overall, McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of belonging and community as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. Sense of belonging can be better understood when analyzing what it means to have education and its social interactions be exclusive versus inclusive.

**Exclusive versus Inclusive.** In an educational context, exclusive and/or inclusive refers to the degree to which one feels they are or are not included, or excluded, as part of the school community.

*Exclusion*. Exclusion in the context of this study is defined as the lack of inclusion of a particular race, religion, feeling or experience. Exclusion can be understood in the following scenario described by Buhs, Herald and Ladd (2006):

First, peers express the dislike they feel toward rejected children by treating

them more negatively than other classmates, and, once manifested, these

negative behaviors serve as visible markers of rejection for both the larger peer

group and for rejected children. Second, once children are marked by

maltreatment, or behavioral manifestations of rejection, they become

marginalized from classroom peer activities. Marginalization occurs because, as

peers become aware of children who are often targeted for maltreatment, they

tend not to associate with these children or include them in classroom activities.

Moreover, rejected children disengage from classroom activities as a way of

avoiding further abuse. Third, disengagement from classroom activities

negatively impacts children's learning, which ultimately leads to lower levels of

achievement. (p. 2)

Based on the above statement, it is clear how exclusion within the classroom is

directly linked to a sense of belonging, or rather, a lack of. In addition, the impact of

student's ability and desire to learn and be engaged is evident. Engagement can be on a

personal, academic, emotional or social level. Simply put, if one does not feel as though his

or her experiences and facets of life are understood, appreciated, or shared with peers, one

cannot feel 'included' nor have a sense of belonging.

*Inclusive.* Inclusive education is a, "universalized and holistic approach to the quality

of education for all" (Brady, Duncombe, & Opertti, 2009, p. 211). This includes all needs,

interests and experiences on the part of all students. It can be understood in terms of three

factors across all learners: (i) presence; (ii) participation, and (iii) achievement (UNESCO,

2005, p. 16; Brady et al, 2009, p. 213). *Presence* refers to the access one has to education and

school attendance; *participation* refers to the quality of the learning experience, according to

the student; and, *achievement* refers to the learning processes and outcomes across the

curriculum (Brady et al., 2009, p. 213). Inclusive education focuses on curriculum renewal

and adjustment, as well of the changing of teachers' practices, in order to appropriately

respond to the "expectations and needs of targeted excluded groups mostly linked to ethnic,

gender, cultural, socio-economic and migrant factors" (Brady et al., 2009, p. 210). The focus

of inclusive education should not be limited to reducing targeted categories of people, but

rather to expand the provision of quality, friendly and diverse learning environments and

opportunities for all. According to Brady et al. (2009), it is seen as contributing to the

fulfillment and enjoyment of the right to education for students, and promotes diverse

teaching practices that effectively engage all students in the learning process. Before we can

expect a student to fully devote all facets of the self to education, learning, and engagement,

the student must first fulfill the 'basic human necessities' of this environment; he/she must

feel respected, appreciated and included. The process of inclusive and holistic education can

also be understood by using the following UNESCO (2005) definition:

> [As a] process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all
>
> learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities,
>
> and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and
>
> modifications to content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common
>
> vision that cover all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that is
>
> the responsibly of the regular system to educate all children. (p. 13)

By providing students with a learning environment that is inclusive and holistic, students are

made to feel safe and at ease to be their true selves, accepting of themselves and others, to

take educational risks, and to be truly social beings. When we allow them to thrive in this

way, we are allowing for the development of citizenship, and hence, resilience and a sense of

belonging.

**Support**

Support can be thought of in terms of academic, personal, and emotional support that comes from bonds and relationships within the school and through professional support, for those who required additional tools and resources in successfully overcoming adversity, despite what this adversity may be. Where there is a sense of belonging and community, the notion of 'support' will naturally exist. Previously described as a stage characterized by social upheaval, adolescence must be given support, to feel appreciated and accepted for who and what they are, as they work through inevitable challenges of adolescences and venture toward developing a healthy sense of self and well-being.

Schools should share commonalities in working toward "diminishing at-risk designations by providing the students a context in which they feel valuable and in which the public sees students as productive and influential" (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2001, p. 335). There must be efforts continuously put toward positive leadership, a school climate characterized by equality and stability, through a variety of instructional and managerial practices on part of teachers, administration, and students (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2001). Sense of belonging can be especially hindered during times of transition, whether in a personal sense, or a school context. Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) contend that successful transitions from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescent to adulthood should be viewed as priorities of educators and policy makers. A transition such as that from elementary to secondary school must receive equal attention and importance in order to transition through this sometimes difficult and frightening experience. Students' sense of belonging within a school environment is positively linked to liking school, enjoying class, demonstrating a concern for others, and having conflict resolution skills; students' sense of

belonging is negatively linked to depressive symptoms, social rejection, peer victimization, delinquency, and drug use (Anderman, 2002; Battistich & Hom, 1997; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Leis, 2000). Furthermore, youth who do not experience a sense of belonging at home, at school, or in their community have been found to seek out connections in self-destructive ways, such as gang involvement, and poorly chosen friendships (Knop, O'Sullivan & Tannehill, 2001). Youth from single-parent households are at an increased risk of smoking, drinking alcohol, illicit drug use, being involved with weapon-related violence, and engaging in premarital sexual intercourse than those from two-parent families (Blum, Beuhring, Shew, Bearinger, Sieving & Resnick, 2000; Chou, Lee, Liang, Kuo, H.H., Chang, Lai, Chu, Kuo, H.W., 2006). On the contrary, students from a household with a strong SES and family structure tend to have high rates of student engagement (Friesen et al., 2009). It has been generally found that the higher the SES background the student comes from the higher the levels of engagement, participation, sense of belonging, and attendance, making these students about one and a third times more likely to be engaged in their school settings compared to those from low SES backgrounds (Willms et al., 2009). To promote and to create a sense of belonging within the classroom and school context as a whole, schools must provide opportunities to students through a full range of programs and approaches to education, providing a community that students can be a part of and feel supported in.

**Safe Learning Environment**. Similar to the notion that where there is a sense of belonging, is the notion that where there is support, there is the feeling of 'safety'. In regards to a school environment, this pertains to safety and ease in one's classroom and general school vicinity. This safety should be both actual and perceived.

Schools must aim to create safe environments where students are at ease to be their true selves, possessive of unique and individual strengths, emotions, ambitions and experiences. According to Beamon (2001), students who experience school as a safe and supportive environment will be more successful at student achievement, as well as at developing qualities such as good character and citizenship. Furthermore, full engagement of a school community is essential in creating and maintaining schools where students are able to feel respected, safe, and supported (Beamon, 2001). A safe school community fosters healthy social relations and can encourage students to be more open and honest during classroom engagement, discussion, social interactions and in extra curricular.

The idea of creating conversation and dialogue, about a variety of issues and shared experiences, serves as a learning experience in itself for students. According to Freire (2009), "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (p. 150). Likewise, Gadamer (1975) states:

Dialogue enables us to come into contact with and appreciate perspectives that are different from our own, to compare and contrast our beliefs with those of others, and to allow for the generation of new understandings – a shared perspective and a shared language – that were previously not available to us. Through such dialogue, criticism and ultimately new understandings, we are placed in a better position to critically reflect upon and possibly evaluate the worth of personal or traditional customs, ideas and belief that may have been at one time unconscious to us or protected from reasonable criticism – such as beliefs regarding equal rights, politics and the highest forms of good in human life (p. 26).

We can again, note a transactional relationship between a supportive, safe environment, and a sense of belonging. More specifically, we can note a transactional relationship between the use of dialogue and a supportive, safe environment. The ability to freely communicate and share opinions and experiences allows for the sharing of and learning of new perspectives. According to Dewey (1959), education should be thought of as a continuing reconstruction of experience. It is through the sharing, and valuing of various perspectives, opinions, and personal experiences that students are challenged to think critically, and to develop skills of sympathy and empathy.

**Empathy**

Empathy can be thought of as a social interaction between any two individuals, where by one individual experiences the feelings of a second individual (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2011). Empathy is the ability to acquire a revised or alternate perspective on a circumstance or issue, identify with another individual's feelings, or simply put, to 'walk in someone else's shoes'. Generally speaking, empathy is accepted as something that can be learned, and therefore, taught and trained (Decety & Ickes, 2011). Empathy is viewed as an important component in the matrix of developmental variables, which mediate cognitive and affective behaviours, all of which are important to schooling and a positive educational experience (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2011). It is not only important to students to practice empathy amongst themselves, but for teachers to practice empathy towards students. Carl Rogers has heavily influenced this realm of research. Rogers, Gendlin, Kiesler, and Truax (1967) view the teacher in a role similar to that of a counselor or therapist, and the student in a role similar to that of a client. More specifically, Chang (2003) correlated teacher empathy toward withdrawn students with peers' acceptance of these withdrawn students in their classes.

According to Feshbach and Feshbach (2011), empathy can mediate a scope of functions in children, including, social understanding, emotional competence, prosocial and moral behaviour, compassion and caring, and regulation of aggression and other antisocial behaviours.  Furthermore, prosocial behaviours that are linked to empathy include cooperation, sharing, donating and other altruistic acts that generally yield positive results (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2011). Research also supports a relationship between empathy and aggression, especially in males, where by aggression is decreased as prosocial behaviour is increased (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2011). Other positive effects of the development and presence of empathy include, but at not limited to: a more positive self-concept, self-regulation of emotions and self control, assertiveness, consideration for others' perspectives, and the ability to emotionally respond to others (Decety & Ickes, 2011).

**Research Framework**

**Social Cognition Theory**. Social Cognition Theory (Bandura, 1986) is applicable in the context of school and education, as it accounts for academic achievement, engagement, and learning by way of the reciprocal interaction between personal (i.e. cognitive, affective, biological), behavioural, and environmental influences (Holt, Bry & Johnson, 2008). Holt, et al. (2008) provide the following example:

> A student who begins to attend class more regularly (behaviour) may receive
> positive feedback from his or her teacher (environment), which may, in turn,
> enhance the student's confidence (personal) that he or she can complete the
> required work. As a result, the student may maintain her or her pattern of
> improved attendance. Conversely, a student who lacks motivation or a sense
> of efficacy (personal) may avoid attending class (behaviour), which, in turn,

may alienate him or her from supportive adults in the school (environment) (p 306).

With respect to the *personal variables*, and at times, the behavioural variables, such as, but not limited to: (academic) self-efficacy, perceived competence, decision making, and a sense of school belonging or connectedness, have been important variables in regards to the extent that a student can engage in self-regulated learning and experience academic success.

*Behavioural variables* in academic achievement can include, but are not limited to: good attendance, being on time for class, class preparedness and participation, and avoidance of disruptive behaviours such as fighting or breaking school rules (Holt, et al. 2008).

*Environmental variables* that can influence school-related behaviours and cognitions include, but are not limited to: socioeconomic status, neighbourhood characteristics, parental aspirations and academic efficacy, and adult support at school (Bandura et al., 1997; Holt, et al., 2008).

Social Cognitive Theory suggests that an intervention in a student's educational environment could influence their academic inclinations, given the relationship among the environmental, personal, and behavioural domains (Holt, et al., 2008). *BLAST* can be thought of as this intervention, as it targets the environmental (sense of belonging, support), personal (compassion/acceptance, empathy) and behavioural (respect, resilience) domains that Bandura makes reference to in this theory. As support to this claim, Alfassi (2003) and Greene and Ollendick (1993) conducted various studies where they were able to successfully utilize school personnel to create an environment characterized by structure, guidance, academic skill buildings, frequent monitoring and feedback. The environmental conditions in these studies lead to cognitive and behavioural change and improved grades in the students

with academic difficulties suggesting that adults in the school setting have the potential to shape students' academic trajectories (Holt, et al., 2008). This same study deemed results that confirmed significant and positive effect of mentoring, observable in the areas of teacher support, school belonging, decision making and whether a student entered into the discipline system (Holy, Bry & Johnson, 2008). Holt, et al., (2008) findings align with those of Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson and Abbott (2001) who found that adolescents' school bonding decreases each year, from age 13 to 18, unless these adolescents participated in some sort of school-based social development intervention. *BLAST* objective is to facilitate healthy interactions with peers, teachers and other trustworthy adult figures. By establishing this student-teacher relationship, the opportunity arises for one to create a trusting bond that the student may utilize in a time of need. This trusting bond also promotes a sense of belongingness within the school. Likewise, Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe and Taylor (2006), found that adolescents receiving weekly school-based mentoring had a high sense of school belongingness, as compared to those who did not. In regards to resilience, socially-guided learning encourages self-directed learning by providing conceptual tools needed to gain new knowledge and to deal intelligently with the variety of situations they will counter in their everyday life (Bandura, 1989).

In summary, findings suggest that students considered 'at risk' for academic failure and who spend sufficient time with a mentor, report feeling more connected to various aspects of the school environment, most notably with their teachers (Holt, et al., 2008). Research findings (Holt, et al., 2008; Hawkins, et al., 2001) encourage the notion that there are observable, longitudinal relationships between higher levels of school belongingness and better grades, lower crime, less substance abuse, and fewer risky sexual behaviour, which in

the long-term, can result in increased resilience and the ability to cope with adverse situations in the present and in the future.

      **Sociocultural Theory**. Like Bandura, Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as a "social process and that origination of human intelligence in society or culture" (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky asserted that, community plays a central role in the process of making meaning, and that learning is both necessary and universal in the process of human development. *BLAST* epitomizes this social learning mentality by way of its structure. *BLAST* combines a series of small and large group activities as a way to learn from others, about others, and at times about oneself, throughout the course of the day. Sense of belonging is immediately established through the fun icebreaker games at the beginning of the event. Watching peers participate in the games, and eventually more meaningful activities, encourages others to participate as well. As a result of everyone's involvement in the day and its activities, participants feel as though they are progressing through the day together, and feel safe enough to experience it whole-heartily.

      Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory can also be explained using the following example: a child learns through social interaction, alongside a mentor or skillful tutor. This tutor models behaviours and/or verbal instructions for the child, which Vygotsky refers to as cooperative or collaborative dialogue. From here, the child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor, internalizes this information, and uses it to guide or regulate his/her own performance (McLeod, 2007). Essentially, the behaviour observed aids

in the creation of culture, which is then perpetrated by the child through his or her own actions.

Vygotsky (1978) views cognitive functions, even those carried out individually, as affected by beliefs, values, and tools of intellectual adaption of the culture (McLeod, 2007). Vygotsky also speaks toward "reciprocal learning," which can be used to improve students' ability to learn from text and language, as well as from one another (McLeod, 2007). Using this method, teacher and student collaborate in the learning process. Vygotsky's theory also suggests that group members should have different levels of ability so that more advanced peers can help less advanced members in knowledge and culture acquisition (McLeod, 2007). In the case of *BLAST*, this can be seen through the different experience students and adult reveal throughout the day, turning these (shared) experiences into knowledge.

Applying the above philosophy to the classroom and other educational experiences allows for students to learn from one another. More specifically in the case of *BLAST*, to learn how to treat others based on how they want to be treated, by offering and receiving components such as respect, support, empathy and compassion/acceptance. Students are able to learn and to develop these abilities by listening to shared experiences of their peers and teachers.

**Summary**

School experiences have great influence on a student's development of resilience and a sense of belonging. Schools can create an environment where these character development skills are fostered, or stifled. The importance of providing educational experiences that are beneficial to personal, professional and social well-being must be holistic and diverse in nature. Scales et al. (2006) indicate that as students' progress through middle school, assets

that have the potential of increasing resilience and a sense of belonging, tend to decline. In light of Bandura (1997, 1986, 1989) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories on social cognition and sociocultural impact, it can be suggested that since one tends to learn behaviours and traits from peers, schools should be asking themselves how to utilize this conformity in a positive way. Scales et al. (2006) suggests that the decline of resilience and sense of belonging may be a result of lacking empowerment, co-regulation, and meaningful participation that is wanted, and needed. The ways that schools are organized, how the rules are created, and the approaches used in the classroom for learning, all have the potential to positively or negatively impact resilience and sense of belonging (Scales et al., 2006). Schools need to teach toward resilience and sense of belonging so that students are shaped into capable, competent citizens.

Through this study, my intent was to contribute to existing research pertaining to resilience and a sense of belonging, as well as explain why the building of resilience and a sense of belonging should be components of every and any school experience. Furthermore, I will assess the effectiveness of *Project B.L.A.S.T* in building resilience and sense of belonging through the perceptions of adult participants. The perceived impact of the event was studied as a way of contributing to the limited bank of knowledge that exists on these sorts of one-day activities, events, or interventions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

**Rationale of Study**

The rationale for this study is to explore the impact this one-day event, *Project BLAST,* has on student participants, as related to resilience and sense of belonging, contributing to overall student climate, as perceived by adults who have participated in the event. This study also seeks to increase the bank of knowledge and research about one-day events and how effective they are or are not. In addition, this research will investigate ways that this program can be strengthened and improved upon for future executions.

**Project BLAST**. *Project BLAST* is based on the event Challenge Day ("Challenge Day," 2014), which has received a great deal of media attention. Featured on MTV and *The Oprah Show,* Challenge Day has been shown to have a profound impact on all participants, adults, teachers and students alike. Those who have attended a Challenge Day report feeling, "more open-minded, were more accepting of fellow students, and were more likely to consider themselves as loving persons" (Starfire, 2008, p. 3). Students also revealed that after participating in this event, it became easier to share feelings, that they became more aware of when teasing and bullying is occurring around them, and demonstrated a heightened academic interest (Starfire, 2008). *BLAST* is an adaption of Challenge Day that I have modified to fit the needs of the community in which it runs. *BLAST* originated at the University of Windsor's Faculty of Education as a Service Learning Project in the LEAD course. *BLAST* continues to be affiliated with the University of Windsor's Faculty of Education, as well as other faculties of study. It works in collaboration with both of the local school boards in recruiting schools, participants and organizing/administering events.

*Project BLAST* stands for: breaking barriers, loving yourself, accepting others, similarities not differences, and totally inclusive experience. The philosophy behind *BLAST* is similar to that of the event Challenge Day ("Challenge Day," 2014), which combats misconceptions by challenging social norms and comfort zones, providing an insightful look into realities of today's youth. By bringing to light adversity, the program promotes acceptance, healthy peer relations, and raises sensitivity and compassion from teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-student. The cost of bringing a Challenge Day into a school can be difficult for many as it is a very expensive endeavor. As mentioned, *BLAST* has adapted its program to meet the needs of its community, one of which being the cost to run the event. The cost of running *BLAST* is a small fraction of what it costs to run Challenge Day. This is with the intent of getting this program into as many schools as possible so that an array of students are given the opportunity to partake in this experience. Cost is negotiated on a school-to-school basis.

For every five students who participate in a *BLAST* event, one adult participant must be present. Adult participants are required to assist in running the event by acting as role models, participating in an enthusiastic and positive manner. Adult participants must also be present for sake of liability, as a reliable individual responsible for reporting on any students he/she feels needs additional follow up. During the event itself, adults are also present to act as a source of support for students who may be having a difficult time.

In developing more socially competent youth, *BLAST* assumes a proactive approach to challenge, seeking to improve personal and social experiences by targeting relationship and communication skills, self and peer respect and safety, and promoting anti-bullying and emotional expression. *BLAST* attempts to encourage students to take initiative and pride over

creating change, first within themselves, and then amongst their peers, in other words, partaking in the act of social responsibility. *BLAST* also attempts to ensure the safety of all students, from an emotional and psychological standpoint, by providing follow up and support. The follow up appointments and activities that are to take place in the weeks and months following the event have been created in order to ensure optimal results and lasting effects. *BLAST*'s goals and mission are as follows:

**Table 1 – *Project BLAST*'s Goals/Mission**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Students* | It is a look into the lives of friends and peers |
| *Educators from the hosting school* | It is a look into the lives of 21$^{st}$ youth, as well as a way to identify those who as 'in-risk' |
| *Teacher Candidates and other community members* | It is a training exercise on how to work with youth, as well as 21$^{st}$ century challenges youth are facing |

*Project BLAST* is a program that is requested by schools and brought in by myself, the event coordinator. Adult volunteers are recruited from the University of Windsor and surrounding community. This program is extremely structured in nature. All participants, student and adult, must be compiled prior to the day of the event, and must be able to stay its duration. The event typically takes place in the gym of the hosting school. All doors are to remain locked throughout the duration of the day, to ensure inclusivity of this event, and to ensure there are not any individuals walking in and out of the gym. Lunch is provided. Washroom breaks are also to be taken at designated times.

***Preparation.*** The night prior to the event, or the morning of, it is the responsibility of the *BLAST* team to setup for the event. On the day of the event, the morning begins by gathering all adult participants fifteen to thirty minutes prior to the start of the event to explain their roles and responsibilities for the day. Adults are told to follow all instructions

given to them by the MCs throughout the day; they are to participate in all of the same activities as the students. They also serve the purpose of acting as role models, exhibiting enthusiasm, encouraging reluctant students, and during more meaningful activities, providing support. All components of the day are to be kept confidential, with the exception of: (1) a student is hurting/himself; (2) a student is being hurt: and/or (3) a student is planning to hurt another individual.

*Introduction.* When this pre-briefing is complete, the adults, who have formed a human tunnel, accompanied by dancing, music, and cheering, usher students in. Once all participants have entered the gym, all participants choose a chair to sit in, all of which have been arranged in a half-circle formation. At this time, the MCs welcome everyone to the event and run through the rules of the day, including: (i) I will respect confidentiality; (ii) I will challenge myself – physically and emotionally; (iii) I will be honest and act with an open mind; (iv) I will show compassion as I validate and respect the thoughts and feelings of others, and; (v) I will have fun! Students are made aware of the 3 conditions that are not considered confidential as well: (i) if a student is hurting/himself; (ii) if a student is being hurt, and/or; (iii) if a student is planning to hurt another individual. Students are also taught the sign used throughout the day to show 'silent support', 'I love you' in sign language.

*Icebreaker Games and Snack.* With the introduction talk complete, students play a series of icebreaker games with the intent of intermixing them, getting them awake and moving, and easing any initial awkwardness. After a few rounds of games, students are randomly assigned a partner and given a snack, which they are to eat with this partner while discussing their future goals and dreams using present tense language. Once snack time is complete, the floor is opened to anyone willing to share.

***Stereotypes Discussion***. When snack break is complete, participants are evenly

numbered off. Participants are a told to remember who is in his/her group for when groups

resume later. These small groups are referred to as, 'family groups', throughout the rest of

the day. These groups contain at least one adult to every five students. Best efforts are made

to break these groups up evenly according to gender, and to separate any students who are

best or close friends, or family members.

It is now that the more meaningful activities begin. All participants are to gather in a

half circle around the two MCs, with their 'knees touching the back of the other

persons' chair'. The two MCs carry on a discussion about stereotypes, male and

female, encouraging group participation. Some examples of questions posed are:

What pressures are you faced with as a female/male? What are some of the images

the media portrays? What are some ways you cope with stress factors or difficulties?

All answers are recorded on a chart paper to provide a visual component to this

discussion. Moving on, the analogy of a balloon is used. It is explained that everyone

carries around a personal balloon. It is in this balloon that all feelings, thoughts, and

experiences, good and bad, are stowed away. Furthermore, participants are told that

like a real balloon, when these personal balloons become too full, they burst. It is

emphasized that 'some people carry around very heavy balloons, and we may not

even know it'. The next analogy used is an iceberg. Only 10% of an iceberg is visible

to the eye, the same way only 10% of our selves is shown to the world, and typically,

this 10% is aimed toward fulfilling stereotypes, what is labeled as 'acceptable' in

society. The other 90% of the iceberg represents the large portion of the true self that

is left beneath the surface. Much of this 90% is also stowed away in our personal balloons.

***Personal Story.*** This discussion is a lead into a personal story telling portion of the day. At this time, two pre-chosen adults (sometimes the MCs) tell the group a personal story. As mentioned, *BLAST* accommodates the needs of its community and school, so the individuals selected to tell this 'personal story' as chosen with strategy and intent. These individuals are personally chosen by the program coordinator to best fulfill the demographic/needs of the school population. The story always starts off very positive, focusing on what is seen on the outside, then dives deeper to what has happened on the inside, using the line, 'but if you knew me, if you really knew me, you'd know that…" Past stories have included drug and alcohol addictions, bullying, parental abandonment, disease and illness, abuse and molestation, and suicide contemplation. In the past, these 2 stories have evoked a degree of emotion throughout the room, and set the tone for the next activity.

***If You Knew Me.*** Students, who have already been numbered off, gather into their small family groups, with members instructed to sit in small circles, close enough so that all knees are touching. This next activity is called, 'If You Knew Me'. As instructed by the MCs, each individual has a full three-minutes to him or herself. Challenge Day designates three minutes for individuals to speak, but based on feedback and experience, *BLAST* has modified this time to three minutes. These three minutes can be used to tell a personal story, it is encouraged that everyone challenges themselves to reveal something others may not know, that will provide them a better glimpse of this individual's life and experiences. Participants are also told that if they do not comfortable or are feeling hesitant, these three-minutes can be used partially, or used for complete silence. Regardless of the individual's

choice, these three minutes are personal, and belongs to this individual. No one else in the group is to be talking, contributing, or offering support. Participants are told, 'no one here is broken, no one here is to be fixed, we are only here to listen'. After these three minutes are up, the group thanks this person for his or her contribution, and the MC signals the next three-minute rotation. This activity provides participants a small, but safe environment to come forward and open up about personal issues of their choosing. It also serves as a learning experience as participants listen to the voices of their group members. Adult participants are asked to share first, so that the tone is set for the rest of the group, and that its members are made to feel more comfortable when it is their turn to share. This activity lasts roughly thirty minutes, and has been very emotional for many in the past.

*Lunch*. After the "If You Knew Me" activity, participants are provided lunch, and are asked to remain in their family groups for the duration. After lunch, one-to-two more icebreaker games are played with all participants. It is now that the largest activity of the day begins, called 'Cross the Line'.

*Cross the Line.* For the 'Cross the Line' activity, two lines are taped across the floor, roughly six feet away from one another. All participants are to stand behind one line, facing the same direction. The MC calls out a number of categories. When a category applies, participants are asked to cross the line, turn back, and face their remaining peers. It is at this time that those who did not cross the line use the sign of silent support, holding it up towards those who did cross the line, and a commentary on the category is given by the MC. Categories touch on a wide variety of issues, including, death, disease, illness, mental illness, suicide, self mutilation, disability, disorder, handicap, war, victimization, bullying, body image, self-esteem, sexual orientation, domestic situations, academic pressures, divorce,

abuse of all kinds, sex, drugs, alcohol, addiction, racism, discrimination, stereotype, poverty, and others hardship issues. This activity is done in complete silence, lasts roughly 45-minutes, and again, has evoked a great amount of emotion in the past. Done as a large group activity, participants are made to feel safe enough to cross the line, because rarely does any one individual cross alone. This activity also serves as a visual representation of just how many students face difficult and compromising situations.

  ***Letter Writing and Open Mic.*** Once this activity is complete, participants gather back into their small family groups and partake in a letter writing session. Blank cards are distributed to all participants and time is allocated for the completion of this task. Participants can choose to write a letter to whomever they wish; they have the option of giving or not giving this letter to this individual. This can also serve as a personal reflection; it can be a note to the self, or a diary-like entry. Following this session the microphone is opened up to anyone willing to share any thoughts or feelings on the day, what it meant to them, to share their letter or make an apology, or to offer feedback; all participation is welcome. *BLAST* devotes a larger part of the day to both the letter writing session as well as the open microphone session. The length of time spent on these activities is based on the response from the particular student body participating in the event. Following this activity is the portion of the day where participants, student and adult, voluntarily, partake in the research portion of this study. Consenting students will be given a survey and general feedback form to fill out, and consenting adults will be given their own general feedback form to complete. This feedback form has been developed by the *BLAST* team and is custom to this event.

*Conclusion.* Before the day ends, *BLAST* hopes to send all participants off on a positive note. An icebreaker game is played and the MCs conduct a concluding talk with the entire group. *BLAST* encourages all participants to carry on the program's philosophy.

*Debriefing.* Fifteen to thirty minutes after the event, all adults regroup for a debriefing to recap the day, provide verbal feedback, and most importantly, evaluate the status of each student participant from his or her family group. Adults are reminded of the three conditions that are not considered confidential: (1) a student is hurting/himself; (2) a student is being hurt, and/or; (3) a student is planning to hurt another individual. Professional personnel are on site to deal with any outstanding student issues adults may have encountered throughout the course of the day.

## Research Design

**Qualitative Case Study**. To study the impact of this event, qualitative research design served as most beneficial. Case study research is an approach that is qualitative in nature, where researchers focus on a unit of study known as a founded system; it is an investigation of a phenomenon that occurs within a specific context (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). In this case, the specific context of this study is the environment created by the *BLAST* event. Case study research allows a researcher to study phenomena that are not easily or appropriately studied by other research methods. Case study research is useful when describing the context of the study and the extent to which a particular program or innovation has been implemented, and the process by which a particular innovation had a particular effect on the participants in the setting (Gay et al., 2009). Furthermore, I used a combined study approach, with primary data comprised of adult interviews, and secondary data comprised of previously collected student feedback forms. The intent of using a combined

study is to analyze adult responses and to see if and how they map onto secondary data

student feedback provided about this event. In doing so, I used thematic analysis and data

triangulation when exploring the primary interview data and secondary feedback form

response data.

**Thematic Analysis**. Thematic analysis provides is a method for identifying,

analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, while interpreting various aspects of

the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The advantages of thematic analysis are

many (Appendix A), and include: flexibility; the ability to usefully summarize key features

of a large body of data, and/or; offer a 'thick description' of the data set, highlight similarities

and differences across a data set and generate unanticipated insights, among other advantages

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six steps, or phases, of thematic

analysis  (Appendix B), as well as a 15-point checklist (Appendix C) of criteria for "good

thematic analysis." The phases of thematic analysis cited by Braun and Clarke, as well as

used by myself during my analysis of data, are as follows: i) familiarizing yourself with your

data; ii) generating initial codes; iii) searching for themes; iv) reviewing themes; v) defining

and naming themes; (vi) producing the report.

The 15-point checklist outline by Braun and Clarke include five major headings for

consideration and use: i) transcription; ii) coding; iii) analysis; iv) overall; v) written Report.

During the course of my data analysis, I employed each of the 15 points, to ensure validity

and reliability to my findings. Here, I will summarize the process of my data analysis using

thematic analysis, used with both the primary and the secondary data.

*i) Transcription*. I was sure to transcribe my data in a manner that incorporated detail

and accuracy. To ensure the above, adult participant interviews were both audio recorded and

transcribed by myself. Post-interview, I used these recordings to accurately document each answer in text format. This allowed me to thoroughly read through my data and code outstanding themes. In the case of the secondary data, students recorded their own responses so I was not required to transcribe answers. I was responsible for distributing feedback forms at the end of each event, as well as collecting and storing these feedback forms.

*ii) Coding.* During the coding process, I gave each item equal attention, using a coding process that was 'thorough, inclusive and comprehensive', as well as 'coherent, consistent, and distinctive'. In reviewing my participant interview, I was able to identify six major themes that emerged from the data: i) resilience and ii) sense of Belonging; iii) respect; iv) support; v) empathy, and; vi) compassion/acceptance. These were revealed to me by colour coding; as I reviewed my primary and secondary data, I highlighted these various themes using various colours: resilience = yellow; sense of belonging = blue; respect = orange; empathy = green; support = pink; compassion/acceptance = purple. By highlighting these themes according to colour, it made it clear and easy to identify each as I begin to more intensely analyze this data.

*iii) Analysis.* Using my colour coded themes, I was able to compromise similar responses to gather and interpret results to create a 'convincing and well-organized story about the data and the topic'. Though the themes commonly overlapped, analyzing in this manner revealed to me the interwoven connections between each theme. Furthermore, I was able to map themes that emerged in my primary data on the responses gathered in my secondary data.

*iv) Overall.* All of my thematic analysis was done in stages, where I was able to scaffold off of my findings each time I analyzed my data. All thoughts, findings and

interpretations from my primary and secondary data were recorded so that I was able to provide a complete interpretation of my results.

*v) Written report.* As outlined in this section, I have explicitly explained the process by which I conducted my thematic analysis, using this 15-point checklist. Furthermore, the language and concepts used in this report are consistent with my theoretical framework, as well as my prior assumptions about the data.

**Research Procedure and Participants**

After ethical approval from the University of Windsor's Research Ethic Board was acquired for both the adult interviews in the primary data collection phase, as well as the use of the student feedback forms serving as the secondary data, a research notification email was sent out to former participants of the *Project BLAST* event (Appendix D). This email included teachers, Faculty of Education teacher candidates and graduates, students and staff from outer faculties, and community members who participated on a volunteer/community service basis. This email explained the purpose of my research and included a copy of the Research Consent Form (Appendix E) and the Audio Consent Form (Appendix F) each individual would be required to sign if they volunteer in the study. Participants were selected on a first come, first served, volunteer basis; whoever replied to this email indicating they were willing to participate in the research were chosen as a participant. A total of 67 emails were sent to former adult *BLAST* participants. I received 38 replies indicating a willingness to participate in the research. A total of 18 individuals were chosen as research participants to be interviewed, as this was interpreted as supplying a sufficient amount of data to be analyzed. To maintain confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms obtained online, from a random name generator. It can be assumed that those who responded to participate in

the research benefitted in one or more ways from participating in a *BLAST* event and/or wanted to support its continuation, hence, the desire to contribute to this research endeavor. It can also be assumed, though it is not certain, that those who did not respond to the email may not have benefitted as greatly, or at all, from participating in a *BLAST* event, or that these individuals may not have wished to participate in research for time or scheduling constraints. It is also a possibility that individuals did not see the invitation email if the email account was deactivated or had not been checked. For example, this may be applicable in the case of former University students, who may no longer be using the University email account the invitation was sent to.

Though I did interview a number of teachers, these individuals were not full-time teachers from the hosting schools of each event. Furthermore, two former student participants were interviewed, who are now aged 18 and older, were able to provide their own accounts of the event and its impact. Though this is still to be considered 'adult perception' of the event, it is truly testimony from individuals who participated as students, but are not legally considered adults. For more information on all participants used in this study, please see Appendix G.

Participants interviewed were asked semi-structured, guided and open-ended questions on their perceptions of the *Project BLAST* event as related to student resilience and sense of belonging, as well as their own experience with the event (Appendix H). Interviews were conducted at the University of Windsor or a location most convenient for the participant. Interviews took approximately 30-45 minutes. Audio recording and verbatim transcriptions were used to ensure accuracy of data collection. Interviews took place in August of 2014 over a two-week period.

The overall risk and group vulnerability was determined as being low, given that participants were over the age of 18, and have become part of the research on a volunteer only basis. Individuals had the ability to withdraw from the research, whether from a particular question, or from the research as a whole, at any point in time, without consequence. Participants were informed of this right in both the invitation email as well as at the beginning of the interview. During the interviews, participants did not display any signs of distress, thus proving the above 'risk' predictions accurate.

All data was analyzed qualitatively, using coding and thematic analysis. The data collected in the primary data interview process is meant to triangulate and further assert any common or similar responses found the secondary data student feedback forms previously collected at prior events, and visa versa.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Primary Data Analysis**. During the data analysis phase of my research, I attempted to enter into an interpretative relationship with all data in hopes of gaining insight into the content and complexity of the meanings put forth by the participants. My engagement with the audiotapes and verbatim transcripts allowed me to pay attention to detail and repetitious themes in the data. To protect the identity of those who participated in the research, pseudonyms have been used throughout this document. These pseudonyms names were acquired from the Internet, from a random name generator. Participants in this study were both male and female and participated on a volunteer basis. All participants were aged 18 and over, and had participated in at least one *BLAST* event. Of the 18 participants interviewed, 16 acted in adult facilitator roles, and two participated as students participants and

facilitators. All quotes transcribed in this document have been taking directly from the raw data.

I was responsible for all aspects of data collection, including the research invitation email, the participant selection process, distribution and collection of consent forms, and interview conduction, including scheduling. It has been my responsibility to store all data collected in a safe, confidential location in my home office.

**Secondary Data Analysis**. The use of secondary data in this study was with intention of complementing the primary data collected from adult interviewed participants. This secondary data was collected from student and adult participants of various *BLAST* events hosted in southwest area of Ontario. In total, I collected 1,245 feedback forms from a possible approximate 1,300 student and adult participants, providing 96% return rate. More specially, this breaks down into 954 Student Participant Feedback Forms and 291 Adult Participant Feedback Forms. I as the Project Coordinator sought approval from schools on an individual basis to collect this feedback. At the time, the feedback forms were meant for personal reflection purposes, and were described to participants as being evaluative in nature. At the end of each event, all participants were given the option to complete a feedback form. All individuals who chose to complete this general feedback form were asked to please be honest in their answers, "If you loved it, great, we want to hear about it. If this wasn't your thing, that's okay, we want to hear about that too." I was solely responsible for handling and reviewing all feedback forms. All forms are to be considered adult-facilitated 'student voice'. These forms were completed on an anonymous, volunteer basis, with the only demographic distinction being whether one was a student participant/facilitator (Appendix I), or an adult

facilitator (Appendix J), and were locked in a secure place in my home office for confidentiality purposes.

I was responsible for all aspects of student feedback/secondary data collection, including distribution and collection of forms, and review of the forms. It has been my responsibility to store all feedback/data collected in a safe, confidential location in my home office.

For this particular study, a total of 10 secondary feedback forms were chosen for analysis, at random, from each of the ten *BLAST* events that have been run. This brings the sample size to a total of 100 secondary data feedback forms. Thus, with a sample size so large, we are able to generalize these results among participants of the *BLAST* event. I will now summarize the data according to theme.

**Ethical Considerations**

The University of Windsor Research Ethics Review Board reviewed this research proposal to ensure that this inquiry is ethical, respectful, and that it focuses on the content that it is intended for, thereby causing no apparent harm to the participants. After permission was granted to obtain my primary data, participants were required to sign a research consent form, documenting freely given informed consent to participate in the study, as well as an audio consent form. Participants were informed about the nature of the study and told that they may withdraw at any time, free from consequence. I also disclosed my position as a researcher, explained to participants that participation in this study is voluntary; that no benefit will be given to this researcher except the benefit of research alone. All interview data is held in a secure location and taped interviews were assigned identity codes to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. Participants were assured that all research, writing, and

publication would be anonymous, and thanked for their participant at the end of the interview. Ethical approval was also sought and received for the use of my secondary data from the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore adult perceptions on and experience with the event *Project BLAST*. To accomplish this task, thematic analysis was chosen as the research methodology to interpret the results.

My research set out to specifically study the event's impact on resilience and sense of belonging. Both of these themes were expected. In the context of this research, resilience and sense of belonging can be thought of as the two hallmarks of this study. In addition, the following supplementary four themes also emerged from the qualitative data collected through both the primary interview and the secondary feedback forms. These four include: respect, support, empathy, and; compassion/acceptance. In addition, participants described these themes in various ways. Table 2 indicates how each theme was analyzed based on how it was described by participants. In addition, each of the 18 adult participants interviewed spoke explicitly of, or made inference to, all six themes listed in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Data Themes**

| THEME | DESCRIPTION |
|---|---|
| **Resilience** | Personal Reflection<br>Overcoming challenge |
| **Sense of Belonging** | Openness<br>Validation<br>Community |
| **Respect** | Impact on students<br>Professional development impact for adults |
| **Empathy** | Perspective<br>Understanding<br>Inclusivity |

| Support | Interactions<br>Environmental |
|---|---|
| Compassion | Patience/Listening<br>Understanding<br>Breaking Barriers |
| Acceptance | Acceptance of self<br>Acceptance of others<br>Relief |

Totaling six, each of these themes were referenced at least once, in each of the individual interviews conducted, as well as secondary data feedback forms that were analyzed. To further examine the primary and secondary findings of each theme, as well as how these themes relate to one another, I will highlight each theme separately.

**Resilience**

Resilient youth are those able to overcome challenging life conditions by gaining control over their lives and becoming responsible, productive citizens (Martinek, McLaughlin, & Schilling, 1999). Furthermore, Bernard (2006) states that resilience is a capacity that all youth must possess for healthy development and successful learning. Based on the examples that emerged from the primary and secondary data sets, resilience can be defined as including, but not limited to: overcoming challenges/barriers/hardships, perseverance, persistence, strong/strength, potential, leadership, character development, personal reflection/self reflection, positive decisions, responsibility, confidence/self esteem, self knowledge/learning about the self, self expression, combatting fear/honest, courage, 'rising above', relief, fresh start, clean slate transformation, transfer of skills, coming to term and ability to cope positively. A testimony of resilience is provided by Matt (current teacher), who perceives *BLAST* as being a "snapshot into the lived experiences of these youth. The

most rewarding part was to hear about their strength and resilience… *BLAST* encourages students to realize that we all go through challenges in our lives and similar struggles and promotes taking control of [their] life and building resilience factors." He continued saying, "it is very clear that this event serves to build resilience in youth. Understanding that others are going through similar challenges and continuing to move forward is very inspirational and motivating for all participants."

In the data analysis, resilience was broken down into the subthemes of personal reflection and overcoming challenge.

**Personal Reflection**. Personal reflection is both an example and requirement of resilience. When one is able to personally reflect on feelings, decisions, etc., one is able to assess cause and effect. Hopefully, in doing so one will acquire the knowledge and skills to assess and handle similar situations that may arise in the future. Resilience leads emotionally and mentally healthy living. Many perceived *BLAST* as promoting and evoking this form of reflection. Rachelle (retail manager) describes, "the relief and personal reflection the student exhibited was like nothing I have ever seen before in a gathering of that age group." Ashley (registered nurse) described the effect as being, "as though weight has been lifted off their shoulders knowing that they are not alone." James (former student participant/facilitator) also described its impact for students as being "relieving." Rachelle (retail manager) perceived *BLAST* as providing, "the ability to come to term with and expressing their feelings in a healthy, safe way." One's ability to do so demonstrates the presence of resilience. James (former student participant/facilitator) added:

Yes, I think this event impacts student resilience because, everyone in the

event was seen as a friend that was willing to listen when someone wanted to

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talk about a problem or what they went through and after one person talked,

someone else related to their story with another. After everyone spoke and a

sigh of relief was made, everyone knew that next time something was

bothering them, they could just talk to someone from the event or even

someone else that they met afterwards and better deal with the problem they're

facing at the time.

In these primary data examples we can see how *BLAST* is perceived as heightening

reflection and relieves students of challenges of the past, present or future. This in itself can

be healing and therapeutic as an aspect of resilience.

These same ideas were evident in the secondary data analyzed. On one feedback form

a student wrote, "*BLAST* has made me feel better and it has been more effective than 6 years

of going to a social worker. *BLAST* has been the best experience in my high school career"

(SD). Another student expressed a similar experience: "It was better than any session of

therapy I've ever had with my psychiatrist of 3 years! I've connected with so many people in

so many ways that I have never thought possible." (SD). The element of therapy and

recovery are cited again in the following student testimony: "It gave me the opportunity to

take the last step of recovery" (SD). Here, we are able to note a sense of closure that has

come at the end of the healing process for this individual.

While serving as a therapeutic outlet for many participants, *BLAST* is also perceived

as inspiring hope for the future in many students as expressed in the secondary data, and

supported in adult perceptions through the primary data. One piece of feedback that

particularly stood out in the data analysis is as follows: "It made me feel like I do belong. It

made me want to follow my dreams"(SD). Likewise, other secondary student feedback

referenced *BLAST* as being, "more inspirational than events I have done before. Like it was just incredible knowing that I am not the only one that has experienced emotional problems and I feel like I got closer to people that I didn't even know before this event and want to thank all the people that took the time to set this up for us" (SD). Also expressed through the secondary idea is the notion of *BLAST* as being proactive, with one student writing: "Keep doing this, it changes a lot on how I feel about others and how to approach my own feelings" (SD). Through these primary and secondary data testimonies, among others, it can be said that *BLAST* is perceived by adults as having an impact on student resilience, as well as serving as a way to develop assets that can be seen as protective and beneficial for the future. Secondary data supports this notion as well.

**Overcoming Challenge**. In *BLAST*, "[the students] are challenged to face their challenges" (Erica). *BLAST* was described as "enhanc[ing] leadership skills among students, promotes responsibility, and above all increases acceptance of the peer and of the self" (Owen). It was also said to aid in the development of "resiliency and a sense of self confidence" (Chase), which "[gives] them courage to rise above their current circumstances" (Chase). Participants expressed that through the *BLAST* event, there is a siege of repression, where many were honest with not only their peers but more importantly, with themselves. In doing so, they were able to learn to accept and overcome challenges, to work towards developing better self-esteem and confidence. This process can be thought of as "healthy development," as described by Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter): *BLAST* is a "vital component of healthy development for adolescents as well as people of all ages," as well as a valuable tool in student growth and success" (Rachelle). *BLAST* assists students in "overcoming [challenges] so that they can reach their true potential (Colleen).

Based on primary and secondary data, *BLAST* is perceived as instilling a sense of 'worthiness' and group membership in it participants. In the secondary data, one student shared: "*BLAST* made me feel good about myself" (SD). Likewise, an adult shared the belief that *BLAST* encourages students to "feel happy with who they are" (Chase) and to "see themselves as brave during the exercises" (Rachelle). Also from the secondary data feedback forms, one student wrote, "Today has made me overcome so many obstacles in my life and it was really nice to get it all out" (SD), while another similarly comments, "Thank you for helping me open up and thank you for helping me learn stuff about myself that I couldn't figure out on my own" (SD). Likewise, one student said, "*BLAST* changed my mindset, made me fix my problems, made me realize things."

Primary and secondary data strongly supports that BLAST aids in the building of resilience. As a way to clearly and concise contends this perception, the following evidence from the secondary data feedback forms speaks to *BLAST* as a whole: "*BLAST* is brilliant. It teaches you that you are worthy of LOVE. Even though we barely know each other, we saw each others hearts and I loved it. I got to learn about people, and to learn there is no point of judging people because everyone has hidden struggles" (SD).

**Sense of Belonging**

Glynn (1981) found a positive relationship between sense of community and the ability to function competently in the community. Applying this theory to the context of education, a student must have a sense of community within the school and classroom in order to be a capable of being a successful student.

Based on the examples that emerged from the primary and secondary data sets, sense of belonging can be defined as including, but not limited to: feeling (more)

comfort/comforted/comfortable, validation, not feeling alone', 'I don't feel alone', school

community, positive climate, acceptance, vulnerability, inclusion/inclusive, relating to others,

bonding/relationships, unity/cohesion, well-being, breaking barriers, shared experiences,

'breaking out of their box/comfort zone', being yourself/being true/being honest/being real'.

As a teacher, Keara perceives *BLAST* as being an event which, "allows the students to break

out of their 'box' and encourages them to be vulnerable", as they "let their guards down, get

their feelings out in the open, and say what they want to say in a controlled and safe

environment" (Lauren). Students are able to "realize that they are not alone in dealing with

their issues, nor are they the only ones facing them." (Lauren).

From the secondary data, one student described the event as being, "amazing. It really

made me feel free about what I was keeping inside all this time. I liked <u>everything</u> about

*BLAST*; the activities were really inspirational and it will be with me for the rest of my life"

(SD). A similar student response reads: "Thank you for everything, I won't forget what

happened today" (SD). Furthermore, another comments:

> It is clear that a sense of community was created through participating in *BLAST*. It is
>
> life changing, eye opening and not only makes me have a better sense and idea of
>
> everyone around me and what they go through everyday but it makes me learn more
>
> about myself too. This event should be done everywhere…This is the best thing I
>
> have ever done and will never forget it" (SD).

> Likewise, the notion of change is also relevant in the primary and secondary data

collected. One student wrote: "My overall feedback of this event was that I think I have

changed as a person and that I accept others more as well as myself. I now know that I am

not alone and I have so much more respect for my classmates […] Thank you so much for

this opportunity and for making such a large contribution to my life and showing me that I am not alone and that I have to love myself because I'm the only me there is" (SD).

Chris, a current teacher, worked with students post-event at a school that hosted a *BLAST*, and contended, "there was a new sense of community in the classroom." Likewise, Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) speaks of students post-event who "have gone as far as to say that *BLAST* saved their life. It was always amazing to hear a student get something heavy off his or her chest and follow up with, I never told anyone that before." This is supported by many pieces of secondary data, specifically a student who spoke to *BLAST* as being "an amazing event that opened myself up to the rest of the world […] Thank you for saving me" (SD). Furthermore, another student shared, "Thank you all for doing this for us. You might have saved a life" (SD). Katrina also perceived *BLAST* as a program that "emphasizes the importance of building relationships", as well as one that teaches how to be "comfortable" and "sensitive" (Lauren) even when dealing with difficult issues. This can be interpreted as ensuring that all feel as though they belong despite circumstances and thus building belonging and community.

Sense of belonging is explicitly spoken toward to in the secondary data, complimenting the primary data. One student indicated, "I think that it gave not only me, but many people a sense of belonging" (SD), while another said: "I feel more comfortable with people in my grade. I realize that everyone is going through something. We have to accept everyone" (SD). Sense of belonging was most commonly demonstrated through the reference of 'not being alone'. In the secondary feedback, a student revealed, "Not only did it make me feel like I'm not alone it made me see that everyone is hurt in their own way and you may never realize it" (SD). Another shared, "It is one of the best things that I have done so far in

my high school career, and I will carry this experience for the rest of my life and let it teach me and show me a new outlook on life and on others…Thank you for giving me a way to take the weight off of my shoulder and know that I am not alone and never will be alone" (SD). Keeping with the theme of community, one student indicated, "What I liked about *BLAST* is that nobody was left out. No matter how much one of us has been through there was more people standing by that person to make them feel like they aren't alone" (SD). Likewise, another commented, "I personally think that this *BLAST* event is the best thing that's ever happened to me. The thing I liked the most was the fact that everyone becomes equal in the end of the day…Thank you for bringing us closer together" (SD).

In the data analysis, sense of belonging was broken down into the subthemes of openness, validation and community.

**Openness**. Openness can refer to one being open to others and their feelings, thoughts and experiences, as well as practice openness of your true self with others. Current teacher Matt (current teacher) recounted his two experiences with *BLAST*:

This event directly impacts students' sense of belonging. Students who participate get to interact with others who they may not have normally interacted with. New understanding and respect is formed, and students leave empowered, knowing that they can have a positive impact on the school climate.

*BLAST* "helps to close the gap between students and teachers" (Chris). For Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate), "It allowed me to leave my comfort zone for the benefit of students." Here we can see the potential for a more open, trusting relationship forming between student(s) and teacher(s), which if nourished, would contribute to a supportive environment where both parties feel cared for, and supported. In light of the

challenges adolescents face, this is perceived as providing the opportunity for positive

intervention of varying degrees, as well as creating mutual respect, and as a result, a sense of

belonging. In the secondary data, this is supported by secondary feedback provided in student

feedback: "Amazing. Life-changing. Eye-opening…I believe that every high school student

should go through at least one *BLAST* event. It encourages acceptance and is eye opening"

(SD).

      **Validation**. The idea of validation is perceived as present in the *BLAST* event,

described as creating "a sense of belonging, spirit, and well being" (Martin, Rachelle). This is

supported largely in part by establishing they do not stand alone in their personal difficulties

(Chase). These qualities are even seen in the adult facilitators, with Rachelle (retail manager)

describing "feeling as though you belong." Will, a Motivational Youth Speaker, described:

> I have since incorporated the cross the line activity into my own presentations as I
>
> feel the impact is tremendous. For me the whole *BLAST* experience has shown me
>
> various ways in which to reach the youth and make a positive impression. Teens need
>
> to feel that they are validated by being heard and by understanding that they are not
>
> alone in some of the most difficult situations they face in life and *Project BLAST*
>
> provides the opportunity to be heard and to come to the realization that they are not
>
> alone in life's struggles and that fact brings comfort to many of them.

Communication and emotional expression is referenced to on many occasions in the

primary and secondary data. One student provided feedback, saying, "It was the first time

that I cried in a while and I needed it […] I feel like I met new people and felt welcome"

(SD). Emotional expression is also demonstrated in the following student testimony: "I liked

being able to share and cry without begin judged. I enjoyed all of the activities and bonding

with my peers" (SD). Likewise, another shared, "I liked this experience because people respected your and your feelings, emotions, beliefs and everyone trust each other […] it was amazing, remarkable, outstanding" (SD). Furthermore, one stated, "I absolutely loved *BLAST*. It helped all of us to become so much more accepting and in turn closer to each others." One student touches on the notion of vulnerability, shedding a positive light by stating, "The whole experience was eye-opening and really changed my perspective of others and myself in general […] everyone was so vulnerable and collectively beautiful!" (SD). In addition, a guidance counselor who also participated in a *BLAST* event at his/her school described, "This was very powerful. Students were engaged, and took it seriously enough that emotional issues surfaced even without words. Sometimes words are hard to find. This event proves that words do not prevent emotions" (PD).

**Community**. In the words of Will (Motivational Youth Speaker): *"The shared experience of cross the line between all of them imparts a sense of belonging as the students start to realize, I'm not the only one who has faced this issues, I'm not the only one who's felt like this and etc...I am not alone."* By feeling as though "I am not alone," is an example of feeling part of a collective community; since you are "not alone," you are a 'piece of the whole'. This in itself is community. Furthermore, former student participant and facilitator, James, provided an apt example of how he interpreted community in the event:

It showed that everyone had something going on in their lives and that the best way to deal with it all was to help each other rather than becoming defensive and closing people out […] After *Project B.L.A.S.T*, I became more comfortable with everything I did and became a more open and outgoing person which has lead to countless friendships and connections in my life.

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Here, James spoke toward group effect, saying, "The best way to deal with it all was to help each other," as well as individual effect, describing how becoming "comfortable" lead to "countless" relationships of varying facets. Where there are relationships there are communities and visa versa.

Likewise, Lee (former student participant/facilitator), explained, "My experience was that the kids really got a lot out in the air and really became closer as a grade. The impact was truly great, it allowed me and the other leaders to bond and get closer." With the "inclusion of all members of the school community" (Ashley) students gain a "sense of belonging," and brought students together allowing them to realize they are "not alone." Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) who worked with student participants post event confirms that it "changed the way they treated other people and also felt like they were treated better by their peer." This is an example of community, as all appear to have been making an effort to extend kindness, so all treated others better and visa versa.

Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate) spoke to the event saying it "has the potential to be transferred outside of the event itself, into the classrooms and hallways of school." Keara (teacher) described a component of the long-term impact as being "the community it promotes within the school." Erica (current teacher) cited her perceived impact as being the bond created between participants. Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate) cited "cohesion between students" and "breaking down barriers" as an outcome of *BLAST*. Chris (current teacher) described, "By the end of the day everyone is united as one. They leave *BLAST* knowing that there are people who have faced similar struggles and made it through. The students have a new outlook on life." This is also seen in the student testimony response, as being "a unity among the set of kids that took it" (Lee).

Ashley (registered nurse) spoke of the community built with *BLAST* by saying, "The long-term impact includes building a stronger sense of community and connection to one another. Students develop friendships, respect, and an understanding of the diverse backgrounds and cultures that make up our society."

**Respect**

As a noun, the Online Oxford Dictionary (2014) defines respect in a variety of ways. I have highlighted 3 definitions that are most applicable to describe the type of respect (*n*) we are looking for in this study: i) a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements; ii) used to express the speaker's approval of someone or something; iii) due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others. Examples of 'respect' that emerge from the data include, but are not limited to: mindfulness, kindness, presence of dignity, building relationships, mentorship, establishing communication between parties, and forgiveness. In the data analysis, respect was broken down into the subthemes of impact on students and the impact on adults in a professional development sense.

*Project BLAST* is perceived as helping to establish respect for the self, internally, as well as respect for others, externally. In light of this perception, respect is created from student-to-student, student-to-teacher/adult, teacher/adult-to-student, and adult-to-adult. Erica (current teacher) spoke of *BLAST* as being "an opportunity for students, teachers, and volunteers to gain insight into their peers lives while gaining respect for them." An example of student-to-student respect is provided in a testimony from Ashley (registered nurse), who reported seeing, at two different events, "two groups of friends who had been fighting….it

was evident that by the end of the day, they had a greater understanding of the importance of forgiveness and moving forward, which was nice to see."

**Impact of Respect on Students**. *BLAST* was perceived as sending "the important message that treating others with respect and dignity cannot be underscored" (Ashley), "in allowing students to become more mindful of their own internal struggles as well as the struggles of their fellow peers" (Chase). By this, students are learning what it is like to be treated with respect as well as learning how to treat others with respect. This is transactional and develops ones sense of empathy as well.

According to the data, *BLAST* teaches students to become "more mindful of themselves and their fellow peers" (Chase), gaining "a new level of respect and understanding for each other and their teachers" (Chris). As mentioned, this act of creating a respectful environment can be thought of transactional with the practice of empathy by way of understanding. Erica (current teacher) described the day, as "students start to discuss the day, apologize to each other, and make promise to treat each other with respect they acknowledge they all deserve." Rachelle (retail manager) described, "Everyone is brought down to a base level of emotions and feelings. Cliques and groups are broken down and they see each other as equals." In addition, *BLAST* "teaches students the negative affects of bullying, how to forgive others and themselves, and how to make positive decision and become strong individuals." In doing so, one is making responsible, mature and positive decisions, which exemplifies development and presence of resilience as well as respect.

Secondary data provided evidence that students were thankful for this experience. Students often expressed their gratitude toward the opportunity to participate in *BLAST*. One individual wrote, "I would like to thank you guys for teaching me that I am a person and that

I have a place in this world and that I am something" (SD). As a way of promoting anti-

bullying, a student described *BLAST* as being "Amazing. This event is eye opening for

everyone involved and should be mandatory for all students. There would be a lot less hate

and bullying" (SD). A before and after revelation is implied through the following testimony:

"I came here expecting to participate in nothing. I leave here with opened eyes. This was the

most effective activity here" (SD). One student even went as far as to comment, "This was

the most humbling experience of my life. I liked every bit of it" (SD).

   **Professional Development Impact on Adults**. *BLAST* is perceived as

"emphasiz[ing] the importance of building a relationship with each student and maintain

open lines of communication with him or her." Katrina (teacher and Community Health

Promoter) continued to say, "I want to be an educator in the future and I now have a better

grasp on the benefits of creating a good relationship between myself and my students after

participating in various *BLAST* events." Equipped with this experience, Katrina now applies

this mentality to her interactions with youth in a variety of situations, including in the

classroom, teaching, and community camps. As a teacher and Community Health Promoter,

Katrina reported now being able to enter various schools with knowledge and resources

available for students, and able to understand the variety of challenges students may require

extra help with.

   Lauren (current Faculty of Nursing student) spoke of how *BLAST* "taught me how to

communicate effectively with high school students, and to be comfortable in extremely

sensitive and awkward situations." This is an important quality to have in order to make

students feel as though all their feelings, thoughts and experiences are individual and valid.

Chase (teacher) said that *BLAST* "made me more mindful of the reasons why students may be having the way they do in the classroom." He then described *BLAST* as being "an essential workshop for all educators because it teachers instructors to be more aware of the possible implications of student's behaviour and given them the ability to recognize warning signs." In doing so, *BLAST* is perceived as being a reminder that there is a person; that as educator we are here to nourish the mind and to nourish the soul. When taking into consideration the amount of hours a teacher spends with a student each year, it is clear why some of these teachers can be as regular and prominent as a parent or guardian.

Likewise, current teacher Erica cited that *BLAST* provided "the kind of understanding that students need, to simply have teacher who truly care about them and will treat them with respect and concern for their own personal battles." In doing so, the students are being validated, consciously, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Validation can only occur when respect for he or she as a person is present.

Chris (current teacher) worked in an Alternative Education classroom, post-event, with students who participated, and provided the following testimony: "There was a new level of respect in my classroom. The students knew that they were not alone in the battles that they face on a regular basis."

In summary, Erica (current teacher) described her experience with *BLAST*:

I am forever grateful for *BLAST* as both a [professional development]

experience and in my future considerations when working with today's

generation of students. Firstly, since I have my own personal experiences that I

was able to recognize and appreciate through *BLAST*, I am able to provide

empathy and support for students. I may not have truly understood this until I

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experienced this event. Also, I strive to always be considerate of students'

struggles outside of the classroom. I feel that this is the kind of understanding

that students need, to simply have teachers who truly care about them and will

treat them with respect and concern for their own personal battles.

**Support**

Support works equally with safety in creating a sense of belonging. Researchers have

reported in students, a high number of supportive friends increases positive involvement in

the classroom (Hirsch and DuBois, 1992; Berndt and Keefe, 1995). Consequently, when this

does take place it can result in insecurity and a feeling of rejection. This makes students

reluctant to actively engage in learning activities, hence, impact their "level of activity in it"

(Murberg, 2004; 2009).

From a teacher-student perspective, Murberg (2004; 2009) finds that highly

supportive relationships with teachers appear to positivity enhance social behaviour and

engagement in school. Ryan, Stiller and Lynch (1994) have shown that positive teacher–

student relations are associated with similar outcomes.

Based on the examples that emerged from the primary and secondary data sets,

support can be defined as including, but not limited to: comfort/comfortable, supportive

environment, provides hop, fresh start, relief/renewal, thankful/grateful, safe, controlled,

reassured, therapeutic, embrace, empower, inspiring/uplifting, inclusive, purge of emotions,

positive emotional/mental health.

Matt (current teacher) described the support environment that he perceived *BLAST*

created as grounds for discussions of all kinds that are important to have in the years of

adolescence:

*Project BLAST* is a program that provides a platform for the opportunity to discuss

real life challenges and problems. We can all agree that bullying is wrong and that we

need to establish a safe and inclusive learning environment for our students however

it can be easier said than done. *Project BLAST* allows for this opportunity to break

down the barriers and the stigmas surrounding perpetrators and victims and provides

a real life learning experience.

These 'discussions' include past, present and perhaps future challenges one has or

may encounter, as well as a chances to promote similarities and "break barriers" of

difference. From the secondary data, a student shared, "I loved the overall environment, how

comfortable it allowed us to truly be ourselves. And I liked how it made us realize that

everyone even those that we aren't close to have the same feeling…one of the most life

changing days of life" (SD). The idea of support describes many facets of the *BLAST*

experience. In one example, Colleen (current teacher) reported:

On a personal level, I know some of my former students who were at the event

remember the event and always tell me it's something that has always stuck

with them. The one student who was male and had horrible social anxiety has

really come out of his shell, becoming more active in the community. And the

second student, a female, she has been seeking help for an eating disorder and

help for abuse of diet pills since admitting to her problems at an event.

Likewise, Owen (teacher and Faculty of Education Graduate student) commented that he is

familiar with "several students who benefitted significantly from *BLAST* as it allowed them

to open up for the first time and in some cases led to them seeking professional help."

In the data analysis, support was broken down into the subthemes of supportive interactions and a supportive environment.

**Supportive (Interactions)**. Where there is a support environment, as described above, there is the opportunity for there to be supportive interactions with others. Chase (teacher) elaborated:

> *BLAST* has an inspiring and uplifting effect on students. It allows students to see others' emotional hurtles, develop their own emotional resilience, and take tools with them that can help in the future. The feeling after the event is amazing and empowers students.

Students leave "with a fresh perspective and renewed faith" (Erica). Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate) described: "*BLAST* offers a new hope and a way out for those that feel stuck through a positive inclusive atmosphere." The presence of an environment that is supportive of all allows students to be true to themselves and to others. As a result, Owen (teacher and Faculty of Education Graduate student) described, "*BLAST* can lead to better self-confidence within student and can lead to improvements in other areas of their lives such as school and home life." Essentially, the *BLAST* experience is perceived as reaching beyond the school and into the home life, and can be thought of as a catalyst for life improvements, as mentioned as branching off in to 'school and home life'. Secondary data supports the notion of supportive interactions. Through feedback, one student shared, "It made me realize how many people I had to back me up, and gave me a way to apologize to everyone I may have hurt. It's a moving and amazing opportunity" (SD). Furthermore, James (former student participant/facilitator) describes knowing "a few students that were also my

friends before this event that went and noticeably just became more of an outgoing and enthusiastic bunch of people after participating."

**Supportive (Environment)**. Environmentally, *BLAST* was found to create a "well-molded, strategically therapeutic experience for every single participant" (Erica). Students are "giv[en] the tools they need to work through their issue as well as being a source of support for their classmates and friends."

Here we see support given to the individual, through the environment *BLAST* creates, and additionally, see that student extend support to others. This can create a positive cycle afterward.

Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) described, "The support at an event and the energy in the school is positive" as a result of the "support created within the *BLAST* environment" where there is "a chance to feel supported and show support" (Katrina). *BLAST* "gives students a safe place to allow them to express themselves…the event in itself is therapeutic" (Martin). Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate) continued to speak in light of its therapeutic elements, saying, "this event show just how therapeutic listening can be, to the self, and to others."

It is evident here again that a support environment leads to supportive interactions and visa versa. This in itself can become a learned behaviour. Furthermore, by "fostering a caring and loving environment," *BLAST* "creates a safe environment where hears can be shared with a sense of safety, and allows students to get over fear and proclaim that they have a struggle and want people to know about it" (Stephan). In this example, we demonstrate the opportunity *BLAST* provides for student growth.

This is support through various testimonies in the secondary data. Furthermore, the environment created by *BLAST* is cited as being one of the key components in the success of the program. One student wrote: "I liked how everyone was so supportive. They should make it mandatory to do *BLAST*. Every grade should experience this because it's life changing" (SD). Another student spoke to how *BLAST* "brought everyone together as a whole. It was nice seeing everyone support each other not just their friends" (SD). A teacher who took part in a *BLAST* event alongside his students strongly contended: "It should be required for each student before they graduate. It WILL create a better school culture and environment" (SD).

**Empathy**

The word "empathy" was originally coined in English by Tichener in the year 1909, to translate "Einfuhlung," which was used by the Lipps and Wundt to mean, "in-feeling" (Gribble & Oliver, 1973). Gribble and Oliver (1973) elaborate that for Lipps, "empathy" was "an action or indeed a determination of our self into the object. In this manner, the objects…are filled with life," acting as an extension of ourselves. In context of *BLAST,* it is logical to think of empathy as also aiding in the development of a child's ability to 'empathize' – understand, appreciate, and respect, [with] others, different from themselves. In addition, this can play an important part in moral education (Gribble & Oliver 1973).

Based on the examples that emerged from the primary and secondary data sets, empathy can be defined as including, but not limited to: insight, (a greater) understanding, gaining a new outlook, seeing others as individuals with individual circumstances, perspective, point of view, 'not alone', awareness, realization, 'eye-opening', emotional involvement/attachment, appreciation, humbleness, relating to others, and shared

experiences. In the data analysis, empathy was broken down into the subthemes of perspective, understanding and inclusivity.

Empathy, though not always explicitly stated, is evident in many student and adult responses. The secondary data also reveals, "you are changing the lives of many. What I honestly love is the way you guys bring us so close that we can open up to other. So that we're careful not to hurt others because everyone in our life is fighting a battle" (SD). Students indicated, "*BLAST* made everyone much more aware of their surroundings and the people they see everyday. Life-changing" (SD). In addition, one student referred to *BLAST* as being, "The best experience of my life that made me look at others different with a better understanding" (SD). A teacher who participated in an event facilitating his/her student indicated in a feedback form, "This event is the key to open students' mind, to talk about something deep down that might not be exposed easily, over it is a great event." Likewise, compassion and accept is evident in the following student testimony:

> I enjoyed seeing the sincerity in people. The love that they responded with was proven in their faces. It gave a glimpse that when people say 'we are one' it is meant. The student showed a sense of sorry and compassion. Using activity to get to know each other, then leaving us to finally speak out hearts out has been such an effective method. In all honesty, I never took time to think through my life, until today (SD)

Another convincing piece of secondary feedback from a student recited, "I think *BLAST* was the most amazing, eye-opening and life-changing experience. I like how we were forced to step away from people we know and share our stories and feeling we've been hiding inside for a while or even forever […] You changed my view on life. Thank you" (SD). One can see that the perceived impact of *BLAST* is both intrinsic and extrinsic. A piece

of student feedback demonstrated a new care and concern for others, saying, "Greatest experience of my life. I'll never forget to smile and be much more accepting" (SD).

**Perspective**. Perspective can be external, such as acquiring a point of view on something or someone, as well as internal, such as acquiring a new outlook or optimism for oneself. Both are evident outcomes of *BLAST* as spoken of by interviewed participants. All referred to *BLAST* as being 'eye-opening' whether through the use of that term or a term that embodies the same idea. Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) shared:

*Project BLAST* is enriching, eye-opening, life-changing, and something each and
every adolescent should have an opportunity to be part of. I think these events
have the power to change the way adolescents see others and also how they see
themselves. The program creates a supportive environment for a group of
individuals who are going through a very uncertain time in their lives. It provides
a chance for those who partake to embrace their empathetic and sympathetic
abilities. I think the Project *BLAST* program is a vital component of healthy
development for adolescents as well as people of all ages.

Will (Motivational Youth Speaker) also described *BLAST* as being 'eye-opening', for both students, as well as for himself as an adult facilitator:

It builds resilient students by exposing each other trials and tribulations, so you
are building a community of people who have shared experience, who can help
one another through difficult periods. It opens all of their eyes…my eyes were
open during this program.

As support by this testimony, by allowing all to be "exposed" to one another, and to see that their "trials and tribulations" are similar, results in the "building" of community.

Stephan (current teacher) spoke to his own experience participating in *BLAST*, saying, 'I can confidently say that this perception will change once one takes part in it. It is truly remarkable the sense of community, understanding and empathy that comes from this event." Keara (teacher) described *BLAST* by saying: "Perspective is the main world that comes to mind. The students gain a new outlook on their lives not just at school and home, but on how they want to choose to mold themselves now in preparation for the future they wish to achieve." In this testimony, it is implied that students are given a new sense of hope and inspiration for their futures, on a short and a long-term basis. This is supported by James' perceived impact, whose first experience participating in *BLAST* was as a student participant. James (former student participant/facilitator) got so much out of the experience that he returned in a later event as a student facilitator: "*Project BLAST* contributed to the needs of students from this generation because it allowed people to learn that regardless of the amount bad things happening in their life to never give up because, there's even more good things waiting to happen in the future." Hope is promoted through the sharing of one's own stories, as well as hearing the stories of others. Current teacher and former Faculty of Education student, Chase (teacher), as an adult facilitator, spoke of a personal interaction with a fellow student participant:

> He came up to me and said, 'I just wanted to say that you inspired me to do better. I'm just like you were. I hate going to school but I love sports, and I want to go far in it. I go to school but I get average or low marks. But after your story I believed that if you did it I can too and start getting good grades.

Chase (teacher) recounted another piece of feedback received from a fellow student participant in the form of a card. The card read: "Your story really opened my eyes and told

me that no matter what life throws at you always stay positive. Even if its death. This message will stuck with me forever." This particular student was uniquely inspired by hearing Chase's story, enough so to show gratitude in thanking him for having 'opened my eyes' and sending him this important 'message.'

**Understanding**. The ability to understand others and the struggles they may be facing is a large component that comes out of the *BLAST* event as indicated by all participants, adult and student, in primary and secondary data. The following testimony provides evidence of this claim: "One of the most common statements I heard during the event was 'I had no idea that so and so went through that experience or is going through that experience." For as much as we like to think that our life journey is one of uniqueness and that no one understands what we are feeling or going through, this program shows them that we all pretty much go through hard times and sadness and grief and in realizing this it opens doors between each other, it breaks down stereotypes and the students begin to look at each other as fellow human being who struggle, make mistakes and falter just like they do and they begin to not look at their fellow students as the jock, the nerd, the pretty one and so on and so on" (Will) .

Will (Motivational Youth Speaker) recounted his *BLAST* experience and brought to light a great point. As event coordinator, I would have to agree that the "I had no idea…" comment is one of the most repetitious reactions from each *BLAST* event. Students, as well as adults, are enlightened by the new knowledge they have gained in this one-day of those around them, whether they be peers or strangers prior to this day. This has also been seen in the adults who have participated in the event. Ashley, (registered nurse) shares a personal story from an event that she participated in:

At the first *BLAST* I did, I saw a girl I had gone to high school with. We briefly

chatted and caught up, and she later shared her story and I was blown away. I was

in tears because I had no idea she had gone through all she did in high school.

And at the end of the day, I hugged her so tightly and apologized if I was ever

"one of those girls" that she mentioned in her story. So this was an experience

that was tremendously eye-opening for me, and it made me wish that I had been

given the chance to attend a *BLAST* event when I was a teenager. It made me

wonder how I might have treated certain people differently, or if I might have

made different decisions. I am so happy students are being given the chance to

complete this experience now because it really does have the power to provoke

change.

Participants contend that *BLAST* allows its participants, student and adult, to "stand

amongst their fellow peers and witness the reality that exists below the surface" (Chase) as

they "identify and relate with others" (Keara). In doing so, participants are practicing the act

of empathy. Current teacher KB described that participants "gain perspective into other

students' struggles and making deeper connections through these experiences" (Erica). In

turn, "it has an immense amount of emotional impact on them" (Lauren); "*BLAST* gives them

the opportunity to understand that everyone struggles […] for different reasons," as well as

"recognize that their peer may be experiencing similar struggles" (Erica). In this example, we

are able to identify an understanding and acceptance of oneself, as well as understanding and

acceptance of others, which in itself is empathy.

**Inclusivity**. Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) spoke of the inclusive

atmosphere created by *BLAST*, where "students can become more empathetic, sympathetic,

understanding and patience after a Project *BLAST* event. Students can also gain a sense of belonging and support within their school community." By getting "emotionally involved with their peers" (Kate), "students will gain compassion, [and a] deeper sense of understanding for others" (Lauren) because "it teaches them that they are not alone in their struggle" (Stacey). Stacey (student and dental hygienist) spoke of *BLAST* in regards to her current career in dental hygiene, saying: "Not only has *BLAST* aided me in becoming a more understanding person, it has made me aware of the issues that this generation are facing, therefore benefiting my dental hygiene practice and how I communicate and relate with patients.

From the perspective of Stephan (current teacher), "*BLAST* reminded me that these students participating are real people with real problem." Likewise, "students these days have their own unique struggles and they must be treated as such" (Chris). Lee, who also participated in *BLAST* initially as a student, and then as a student facilitator, described the impact of *BLAST* on students and inclusivity: "What I think they got out of this event is that they were not the only one going through something and that there are people that they could talk to."

By participants coming to the realization that they are not the 'only one' dealing with particular challenges or circumstances, they are able to feel as though they are not all that different from their peers. When one feels as though he or she is on the same page as everyone else, with common and shared thoughts, feelings and experiences a connection and sense of community, that is inclusive, can be built. Where there is inclusivity, there exists a mutual respect for the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others, made possible through the practice of empathy.

**Compassion/Acceptance**

Compassion in this context can be defined as involving a kindness toward difficulties of others, recognition of experiences as being part of the human process, and a mindful awareness and acceptance of different feelings, particularly pain, of others (Persinger, 2012). Compassion promotes a greater care and understanding of other people, increased empathy, and therefore, greater warmth toward others (Persinger, 2012). As mentioned, compassion and acceptance are mutual in their benefit to one another. In this context they can be spoken of as being transactional. Acceptance can be thought of in terms of the personal or the social. Acceptance is much like themes of sense of belonging and support.

Based on the examples that emerged from the primary and secondary data sets, compassion and acceptance can be defined as including, but not limited to: consideration, patience, listening, honesty, 'opening up', openness/open mindedness, presence of student voice, feeling humbled, decreasing judgment, stereotypes, labels, and bullying, increasing tolerance, sensitivity toward others, showing emotion and sincerity, and stepping out of one's comfort zone. In the data analysis, compassion was broken down into the subthemes of patience/listening, understanding and breaking barriers; acceptance was broken down into the subthemes of acceptance of self, acceptance of others and relief.

**Compassion**. Stephan (current teacher) reported: "*BLAST* has allowed me to become more compassionate and really seek to get to know who my students are as individuals. I now recognize even more how important my role is and how I may be the only person in the life of my students, there to listen to them and to love them." A realized mentorship role is spoken to in this testimony. Professional development can also be thought of in this circumstance as it is teaching educators, for example, that their role goes beyond just

'teaching'; they have the power to be figures of positive influence, motivation and mentorship if a connection can be made with his or her students.

*Patience/Listening.* Katrina (teacher and Community Health Promoter) explained, "I am capable of exercising patience to a deeper extent. I have become more aware of the situations and issues individuals around me may be encountering, and truly understand that each and every single person has their own battle to fight." Faculty of Education Graduate student Owen shared a similar experience, as *BLAST* has "allowed me to build compassion and patience, as well as increase my ability to truly listen when others are speaking." *BLAST* was perceived as teaching how to be "an active listener"(Lauren) and a "willing listener" (Martin), as well as "to always be considerate of students' struggles outside of the classroom"(Erica). Kremer and Dietzen (1991) cite 'active listening' as one of the many techniques that increases presence of empathy as well. In these examples it is clear that *BLAST* has served as a realistic and sobering experience for these teachers, preparing them for the challenges their future students may have be dealing with, openingly or not.

*Understanding*. All participants believed that *BLAST* conditions for an understanding of the self as well as an understanding of others. This event "allows students to see that there is nothing 'wrong' with them, that we shouldn't try to 'fix people', and that in the end, we are teacher, have to find a way to be more aware of these burdens and help our students over them so they can reach their true potential," says Colleen (current teacher). *BLAST* "allowed educators to see a side of the student which is not seen or understood very often" (Martin). *BLAST* "opens students' eye to the severity of bullying" (Lauren), with students leaving with "an open mind and a sense of acceptance" (Katrina), having "learned the important of kindness, compassion and forgiveness" (Ashley).

Keara (teacher) described the impact of *BLAST* as "amazing to witness how quickly students are willing to open up about their fears, home situations, real life problems when given the opportunity to express themselves. I have learned from these conversation that many students are naïve to their surroundings, as they do not realize that they are not alone in dealing with their issues." Here we are able to identify that there is an understanding of the self and an understanding of others that is developed at a *BLAST* event.

**Breaking Barriers.** *BLAST* is perceived as "encourage[ing] students to step outside of their comfort zones" (Chase), and in doing so, allow "many of the youth now look at one another in a different light and are very more open and accepting of each other" (Will). *BLAST* "allows emotions to feel good. It is so rare that people can cry and not feel embarrassed about it […] here, all are able to 'let it all out' in a safe, non-judgmental environment. And that makes all feel good." *BLAST* "strips labels and stigmas and allowed the students to be equal" (Lauren). In doing so, barriers of difference are being broken through the realization of common experience. James (former student participant/facilitator) provides a student testimony on the impact the event has had on his peers and on him:

The long-term impact is that students know they are not alone in their struggles. They think twice before judging each other and they seem to stick up for themselves and others more often […] I don't believe anything can completely dissolve the stereotypical high school cliques but programs like *BLAST* can at least inspire courage in students, to think outside of just themselves." Not only does this exemplify compassion of acceptance, but it is testimony for the basis of respect, empathy, respect and a sense of belonging.

**Acceptance**. Acceptance can be thought of as acceptance of the self, as well as acceptance of others. *BLAST* is perceived as allowing students acquire the grounds to "meet

new people they may not have ever spoken to before" (James), "gain lasting friendships" (Owen), as well as "rekindle old friendships" (Erica) by "open[ing] the lines of communication between one another [which] begins to build acceptance and tolerance for one another" (Will).

*Acceptance of Self.* Furthermore, Chase (teacher) described becoming "more accepting of my past and less ashamed of who I was and what I had gone through. As a result, the act of sharing allowed me to self-reflect and to come to terms with the reality of who I was, who I am, and who I would like to be." When this is done, one is able to being planning for the future in a positive respect. Furthermore, by becoming more accepting of oneself, one will become more empathic and compassionate toward the experiences of others.

*Acceptance of Others*. Rachelle (retail manager) comments, "after each event I was a part of, there was always a sense of belonging and accept that may not be found in the regular halls of the school. I feel that this event can offer students a place to vent, an express who they really are without fear of ridicule, or being judged." *BLAST* has reminded Lauren (Faculty of Nursing student) "of the importance of not judging others and to strip myself of all opinions and predetermined thoughts when interacting with others." This will permeate not only her personal interactions, but also her professional ones in the field of social work. In this light, *BLAST* is served professional development experience for all adult participants interviewed.

*Relief.* After his experience in a *BLAST* event, Stephan (current teacher) continued to say, "I was working in the alternative education department shortly thereafter and many of the students in this program recognized me and spoke about how meaningful the event was to

them and how they felt so much more accept amongst their peers." He shared, "one examples that has tuck with me is a student who told me that she went into the event 'feeling like bricks' and left 'feeling like feathers'. I think that sums up *BLAST* pretty well." In other words, this student is describing a sense of 'relief' as an outcome of the event. This can perhaps include acceptance of the self as well as acceptance of others.

Martin (current Faculty of Education teacher candidate) expressed how *BLAST* has contribute to his ability to listening, saying:

> The power of *listening* was illustrated by *BLAST* immediately. I had never
> realized what I could do for people just by listening to them. Furthermore, I
> realized things about myself as well just by listening to others' stories. I was not
> necessarily helping them, nor suggesting anything, nor criticizing, but simply
> listening. This practice of simply listening to what people have to say is a
> structural element of *BLAST* because of the event's characteristics: the stories,
> the sharing circles, and the emotional proximity students begin to have with
> each other. The event shows just how therapeutic listening can be, to the self
> and to others.

Here we are able to identify that one example of compassion that is seen through *BLAST* is the ability to listen. When one truly 'listens' to another individual, the opportunity for acceptance presents itself. Where there is acceptance, there is a sense of belonging.

**How Emerging Themes Connect to *Project BLAST***

Based on primary and secondary data, a **sense of belonging** or creation of community appears to be at the forefront of the *BLAST* event; a sense of belonging can be thought of as the foundation of *BLAST*. This is created firstly, by having an entire grade level (or most of)

participate together. By not only targeting 'at risk' students, but students of all academic

abilities, from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, the 'nerd' is able to find similarities

between him/herself and 'the jock', while the 'bad kids' are able to see that the 'smart kids'

are facing challenges equitable to their own. Despite the social category or stereotype that

one may be classified as, all are able to recognize that adversity is part of the maturation

process, and that they are not alone in their personal or academic journey. The *Cross the Line*

activity, in particular, does a great job at demonstrating this. As a collective students and

adults watch their peers as they 'cross the line' for the different categories named. Categories

pertain to mental and physical illness, death, disease, abuse of all forms, lacking self-esteem

and other forms of suffering. Though done silently, one 'crosses the line' alongside his/her

peers for reasons and/or categories they may have never realized. For these reasons, among

others, many have classified *BLAST* as being "eye-opening." Essentially, a sense of

belonging is created because all realize that they are more alike, than different.

Likewise, **respect** from person-to-person is perceived as present as the students gain

respect and appreciation of others through this realization. Realization of common experience

also helps to develop **empathy**, as the student begin to understand one another through the

ability to identify with challenges one another have faced, or currently are facing.

**Compassion and acceptance** is perceived as evident in *BLAST*, in addition to the ability for

individuals to gain a deeper understand of one another better, and perhaps the reasons why

individuals act, think and/or feel, or perhaps, do not, the ways in which they do. Furthermore,

students begin to reevaluate their own actions, thoughts and/or feelings of or towards others

as a result. An outcome of this realization is support that permeates the event on multiple

levels. There is a presence of supportive interactions on an individual basis (from student-to-student or adult-to-student), as well as a supportive environment as whole.

Last, as a result of the combination of all of the above, one is able to develop **resilience**. Students are perceived as being made to feel as though they belong, that they are not weird and are not alone in facing their challenges. This can be translated into reassurance that revives hope and optimism for the future and for themself. Furthermore, when they feel as though they are respect, understood in an empathetic manner, treated with compassion, accepted among their peers for all they may or may not be, and supported as a student and as a person, they are given the resources to be resilient, or to seek out any additional help and guidance they may require in order to develop such resilience.

It is important to remember that each of these themes are transactional, and cannot exist alone. Each of these six themes contributes to one another, and has a direct influence on individual development of each.

**Limitations of this Study**

A limitation of the study was my inability to speak to students under the age of 18 as they are considered a vulnerable population and it was difficult to seek ethical approval in a timely manner. Thus to collect data from the students directly would be more meaningful than data as perceived by the adult participants.

Pertaining to secondary data, other limitations that should be considered as a possible variable, include: those who did not complete a voluntary feedback form, perhaps did not complete a feedback form as a way of saying the event was not enjoyed, as well as any bias that may exist on my end as both Project Coordinator and Researcher. As a researcher I view and analyze the world through the lens of my knowledge, experiences and skills.

CHAPTER 5

CONNECTING TO THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Introduction**

Through the lens of Bandura's Social Cognition Theory (1986; 1989; 1997), as well as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), I will speak to the findings found in both the primary and secondary data collected and thematically analyzed. Generally speaking, both of these social theories place focus on how the social aids in the creation of meaning, community, culture, and ultimately, the individual. Furthermore, these theories emphasis how an individual, or a collective, learn from various social settings and interactions. *BLAST* is perceived as using this to its advantage by teaching students the impact of being treated positively, or being treated negatively. *BLAST* is also perceived as teaching teaches students about adversity by demonstrating that it is a normal part of life, which each individual has the capacity to successfully and positively overcome and grow stronger from. Students are taught the importance of a sense of belonging, resilience, respect, support, empathy and compassion/acceptance by being immersed in an environment where one experiences them first-hand. *BLAST* is perceived as not only about teaching its participants that we are alike in our suffering; it also teaches that we are alike in our joys.

The following is the breakdown of the related interview questions to the research questions. Interview questions were carefully chosen, geared toward a particular accompanying research question:

**Table 3 - Accompanying Research Questions and Interview Questions**

| Research Question | Interview Questions |
|---|---|
| 1 | 4, 8, 9 |
| 2 | 5, 6, 7 |
| 3 | 1, 2, 3 |
| 4 | 11, 12, 13 |

The following 6 interwoven themes emerged from the data: i) resilience; ii) sense of belonging; iii) respect; iv) support; v) empathy, and; vi) compassion/acceptance.

Each of these themes contributes significantly to the results and the data's connection to the study's research questions. Each research question will be spoken towards in relation to the primary and secondary data findings of this study. Participants will be spoken of using the follow terms:

**Table 4: Participant Response – Primary and Secondary**

| All | All participants |
|---|---|
| Most | Over half of the participants |
| Some | Approximately half of the participants |
| Few | Less than half |
| None | None of the participants |

All participants mentioned or alluded to at least one, or more, of the six themes contended in this study. As a general statement, there was no evidence of adults or students walking without a personally meaningful experience. In addition, no evidence indicated that any

individuals did not enjoy or appreciate the event. All data collected indicated an overly positive experience with *Project BLAST*.

**Research Question I**

What perceived impact does *Project BLAST* have on resilience, sense of belonging, and overall student climate according to adult participants?

Primary data supports *BLAST* as having a perceived impact on resilience and sense of belonging, hence impacting the overall student climate. Secondary data, which can be thought of as student-voice, also indicated *BLAST* as having an impact on these same variables.

**Resilience**. In the absence of sufficient resiliency skills, individuals become overwhelmed by various sets of circumstances, which can lead to isolation of self, inhibited emotional expression and lack of social competency (Hurlington, 2010). Resilience is especially important during the childhood and adolescent years of development, so that these young people are able to emerge with a strong sense of self and purpose in life. All adult participants reported that they do perceive *Project BLAST* as increasing resilience on student participants, as well as on themselves. All adult participants either explicitly used the word "resilience" or "resiliency", or made reference to resilience using other like terms such as unbiased, fresh perspective, ability to preserve, and clean slate. According to Griffin, Hollidate, Frazier and Braithwaite (2009) when students are able to see themselves as brave, they feel empowered, competent, and capable. Furthermore, these conditions are grounds for healthy development and success of varying facets. In order for development and success to be possible, these factors must be in the presence of resilience (Scales, 1999). According to the adults interviewed, *BLAST* is perceived as increasing resilience in students because it

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provides the opportunity for them to feel as though they are justified in their feelings and experiences, and thus closure can be sought from this revelation. Furthermore, all believe that *BLAST* emphasizes students' capacity to be strong, and to recover and grow from adversity. Another component of resilience is the ability to positivity handle one's own emotions in a positive manner (Scales, 1999; Griffin et. al., 2009). *BLAST* is perceived by all as allowing its participants to be their true selves throughout the day, and as mentioned above, in exhibiting full emotional expression while amongst their peers. Aligned with Bandura and Vygotsky's social theories, students are provided the opportunity to positively express and cope with these feelings and experiences in both an intrinsic way, as well as an extrinsic way, through the support of their peers, and to learn from this experience. Secondary data supports this claim, with many reporting on feeling accepted and at ease, discovering a newfound ability to express and cope with their feelings and experiences, and to move forward in a fresh, positive way, perhaps working through existing conflicts they have with themselves or with others in the room. All participants also perceive *BLAST* as providing the opportunity, resources and support the students require in order to begin the process of healing, or to positively move on from any previously challenging circumstances. In the midst of resolving their own issues, students watch their peers do the same, while assisting one another in this effort.

**Sense of Belonging**. A student's sense of belonging and membership is "undoubtedly influenced by several aspects of the school experience, including both academic and social factor" (Anderman, 2003, p. 4) Anderman (2003) contends that a "sense of school belonging represents students' perception of the social context of school and their place in it," and that "schools are institutions where academic and social dimensions are intertwined" (p. 4). All

perceive *BLAST* as incorporating the academic and the social realms of education as it speaks towards the student and the person. By increasing positive social experiences of education, *BLAST* hopes to increase academic performances as well.

On Student Feedback Forms, students were asked to rate their sense of belonging on a scale of one to ten. This rating was with the intent of providing the *BLAST* team with general, evaluative feedback on the impact this program has on sense of belonging. The average of 1,245 Student Feedback Forms ranged from a pre-reading of four, to a post reading of eight. All forms indicated a minimal of a three-point increase in relation to sense of belonging. In my own experiences reviewing the secondary feedback forms completed by participating students, all 1,245 forms collected forms all *BLAST* events indicate an increase in sense of belonging according to the results of this scale. The degree to which students have indicated their pre and post sense of belonging varies, but never the less, no evidence has been provided that a student's sense of belonging has decreased after a *BLAST* event.

All adult participants reported that they do perceive *BLAST* as increasing and facilitating a sense of belonging among its participants. In the secondary data provided through the feedback forms, students reported parallel experiences.

All adult participants either explicitly used the words "sense of belonging", or made reference to a sense of belonging using other like terms, using words such as acceptance, belonging, community, not feeling alone, and feeling comfortable being and expressing themselves in this group. For the student participants that spoke toward the theme of sense of belonging, these same terms were used. This sense of belonging or community has a transactional relationship with the notion of support. By creating a supportive environment, communication and open acceptance is made possible (Scales et al., 2006), and hence, all

feel as though the belonging, and that their feelings and experiences are validated. Students feel as though they do not need to feel ashamed of who they are or what they have been through, as they witness that their many of their peers have faced similar challenges. Most of the secondary data feedback forms that were evaluated emphasized the 'I had no one idea' notion, in relation to realizing common experience between themselves and their peers. Most students also used the term 'eye-opening', or a term that expresses a similar idea, to explain their interactions with their peers throughout the day. Indicative of Bandura and Vygotsky's social theories, participants, student and adult, are able to learn about others, as well as create a sense of community with and among their peers based on the sharing of common experience.

**Research Question II**

What are the short and long term implications of this event as perceived by adult participants?

It can be concluded that the short-term impact of *BLAST* is perceived as being very strong amongst all adult and student participants, according to primary data adult interviews and secondary data student feedback forms. Short-term impact can be noted in the various emotionally infused pieces of feedback in both the verbal interviews and written feedback forms. Strong short-term impact was described in both primary and secondary data through the use of terms such as power, moving, inspiration, amazing, eye opening and as being a great opportunity for all to participate. Through both data sets, participants expressed being infused with hope and optimism for the present as well as the future. Primary and secondary data also emphasized the presence of the type of social learning that Bandura and Vygotsky speak to; adults and students are able to learn about themselves, as well as how to

emotionally express themselves and their feelings and experiences, by being the presence of others who are doing the same. On that note, students are able to learn things about even their closest of friends they did not know before, as expressed by some adults and students in the primary and secondary. In conclusion, on a short-term basis, adults perceive that *BLAST* does have a strong and positive short-term impact on student participants, as well as themselves. This is confirmed by the secondary data in which students explicitly speak toward their strong and positive experience with *BLAST*. Given that these feedback forms were completed at the end of the event, but within the same day, findings suggest that short-term impact is present, and implies the possibility for long-term impact.

The vast majority of interviewed adults indicated they do believe, or have witnessed, a long-term impact. This impact is likely not as a strong as the short-term impact, but never the less is present. Many students in the feedback forms also make reference to an anticipated lasting impact of the event. Whether this impact has been maintained or not would require additional research to be conducted with these student participants.

**Research Question III**

What impact does this event have on adult participants?

In primary and secondary data, all adult participants indicated that even as an adult facilitator, they were impacted in a personal way, as well as by way of witnessing the impact on others.

All adult participants interviewed through the primary data collection indicate that *BLAST* served as positive learning experience. Furthermore, all participants interviewed indicated that *BLAST* has aided in their ability to understand, exhibit patience, and generally, interact, with individuals of varying facets, in a variety of circumstances, both personal and

professional. Most of these individuals initially became involved with *BLAST* because they work(ed) with a vulnerable and/or youth population of students or adolescents. In relation to their education and/or profession, all participants indicated that it has helped them interact with others, as well as develop a greater understanding and exhibit increased patience for the challenges some may face, whether they are aware of these challenges or not. Individuals who do not work in the realm of education also spoke to how *BLAST* has impact their personal and professional lives. The outstanding response found when adults were asked about the impact this event had on them largely pertained to empathy, and the ability to see and interact with others on a level deeper than what meets the eye. These responses are again evocative of Bandura and Vygotsky's social theories, as *BLAST* is perceived as allowing participants of all ages and roles the opportunity to learn from one another in a variety of facets.

**Research Question IV**

What changes should be implemented in this program to achieve betterment, and hence heightened success, in its future executions?

**Suggestions.** Suggestions included, but were not limited to, acquiring more 'professional' adult facilitators, such as child and youth care workers, as well as social workers, to be there as extra support during the actual events, ending the day on a more 'positive' note, providing resources to students (ex. pamphlets, contact information, etc.) either in the event or directly after, prompt and long-term follow up with the students, exposing students to *BLAST*, or an adaptation of, at younger ages in hopes of instating its philosophy earlier on during adolescent development, and hosting a follow up 'pow wow' to check in with students as well as reinstate the philosophy of *BLAST*. These suggestions,

among others, are for the benefit of the student, to ensure he/she is able to reap long-lasting and strongly supportive benefits form participating in this event.

**Concerns.** Likewise, a number of participants expressed concerns associated *BLAST* in regards to maximizing following up and potential long-lasting impact. The significant concern identified in the data pertained to 'proper' and long-term follow up. Follow up is a concern not only because of the raw emotion that is evoked by the event, but to create change personally, socially and institutionally. Social workers, guidance counselors, and all other mentor teachers, should be willing and prepared to provide adequate follow up to each of *BLAST*'s participants, with some requiring more immediate attention of varying degrees. Follow up can range from a quick 'check in', along the lines of 'how are you feeling since the event', or 'is there anything *BLAST* brought to light that you would like to talk about', to more extensive follow up for students that revealed information that can be categorized as either self harming, considering harm towards others, or having experience being harmed by others. If a school is not prepared to take on this type of follow up, especially if there is a population of participating students, especially 'in-risk', they should not take on the responsibility of bringing *Project BLAST* into a school. It is the school community that is familiar with its staff and students, not the *Project BLAST* team. This claim was also cited by a number of adult interviewed participants.

On a similar note, other concerns and helpful suggestions for *BLAST* include, but are not limited to, continual emphasis on confidentiality, decreased cell phone usage, ensuring that all members of a grade are given the opportunity to participate so that no one is left out, increased presence of the correct professional (social workers guidance counselors, etc.) at the actual event for safety/liability reasons. There was also the concern that students

participating in the event have already been molded and though this may have strong short-term effects, long-term effect may be questionable.

**Other Comments**

In total, I have collected 1,245 feedback forms from a possible 1,300 student and adult participants, giving me a 96% return rate. Specially, this breaks down into 954 Student Participant Feedback Forms and 291 Adult Participant Feedback Forms. Bias aside, I have read through each one and have yet to encounter any negative feedback, or any feedback that would fall under the 'this wasn't my thing' category. All student and adult facilitators provided data suggesting they got 'something' out of the day and felt positive leaving the event. A limitation to this of course may be that not every person completed a feedback form. Perhaps the reason one chose not to complete a feedback form is because the impact may have been negligible. Regardless, data strongly suggests that this is unlikely.

However, I did receive useful, constructive suggestions, particularly in regards to follow up post-event. As stated in both the primary interview data, as well as the secondary Student and Adult Feedback Form data, there must be a dedication on part of each hosting school to properly and abundantly take on the task of follow up with all participants and individual counseling for all those deemed at possible risk, as defined as:
i) self harming; ii) considering harm towards others, or; iii) having experience being harmed by others. This was often cited as a way to ensure a long- or longer-lasting impact of the event on the student population who participated, as well as provide on going counseling to those who may need it.

For the most part, secondary data did not speak much toward any suggestions or concerns. The only feedback forms that did speak toward suggestions and/or concern were

the two adult feedback forms that were chosen at random as part of the secondary data. This can be considered a limitation of sorts, as a result of age (student versus adult). The extent of all other feedback forms, completed by students, was general feedback on the day, which commonly included the expression of thanks and gratitude, the idea that *BLAST* was a positive experience and that it assisted in the recognition of common experience and bonding.

**Conclusion**

   **Key Findings of this Study**. Three key points surface from this study:

1) ***Resilience and a sense of belonging should be an educational goal built into character education***.

  Preparing children and youth with skills of resilience and sense of belonging is a proactive approach to the upheaval encountered during adolescent, and for some, into the adult years. In doing so, individuals are acquiring the personal and social skills required for achievement of full potential and self-actualization.

2) ***There is a need for educational programming with a philosophy rooted in the 6 themes cited in this study.***

  Themes include: i) resilience; ii) sense of belonging; iii) respect; iv) support; v) empathy, and; (vi) compassion/acceptance.

  There is a need to understand the whole child before he/she is ready to learn. Research conducted by Scales et al. (2006) supports the importance of providing educational programming that will assist youth in developing assets such as resilience and a sense of belonging. Scales et al., state that resilience-related skills tend to decline during the middle school years, doing so more and more as the individual progresses into and through

secondary school. By making it a priority, students will benefit in their journey through high school, and teacher will benefit, as they are able to provide a foundation for students to grow toward self-actualization in a personal and academic manner.

3) ***This study has generated substantial evidence pertaining to the impact and outcomes Project BLAST has had on participants since its inception 3 years ago.***

This study used qualitative interviews as primary data, to be triangulated with the student voice-infused secondary feedback data forms voice. Though it cannot be absolutely guaranteed that every single participant has been reached, or changed, data strongly affirms that the vast majority experience significant short-term impact and positive outcomes from *BLAST*.

Regarding the building of resilience and sense of belonging, as cited in key finding #1, it can be concluded that programming or events that embody the philosophy of *BLAST*, if not *BLAST* itself, are important to the development of students, by way of resilience, internally, and sense of belonging, externally. Post-event and with follow up, students will hopefully be equipped with the foundational skills they will need to reach full potential and self actualization.

**Overall Impact**. The success of this project is rooted in its platform, outlined in its acronym, breaking barriers, loving yourself, accepting others, similarities not difference, totally inclusive experience, and in its strategic delivery. It is the totally inclusive and engaging piece that brings the student voice further and allows students to hear the voices of other students. Students and teachers become one community of empathic individuals learning and understanding the challenges and hopes of each member without judgment or advice.  It is about listening and become aware of the school community and the individuals

in it. It brings students from diverse backgrounds together as a community, breaking down the barriers of SES, race, sex, religion, etc. Students engage in deep conversations with other students they have never met before and have grown to understand.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The ability to interview individual students, or conduct focus groups, would have been beneficial in gathering data on student voice and student interpretations of *BLAST*. *BLAST* is meant for the students*,* so who better to know the impact than the students. Further follow up research should be conducted to determine the long-term effect of *BLAST*. As well, research should be conducted to gain insight from full time teachers, counselors, social workers and administration who participated in the follow up with in risk students.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Advantages of Thematic Data Analysis

**Table 3: Advantages of Thematic Analysis**

| |
|---|
| Flexibility. |
| Relatively easy and quick method to learn, and do. |
| Accessible to researchers with little or no experience of qualitative research. |
| Results are generally accessible to educated general public. |
| Useful method for working within participatory research paradigm, with participants as collaborators. |
| Can usefully summarise key features of a large body of data, and/or offer a 'thick description' of the data set. |
| Can highlight similarities *and* differences across the data set. |
| Can generate unanticipated insights. |
| Allows for social as well as psychological interpretations of data. |
| Can be useful for producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development. |

**Appendix B: Phases of Thematic Data Analysis**

Table 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis

| Phase | Description of the process |
|---|---|
| 1. Familiarising yourself with your data: | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. |
| 2. Generating initial codes: | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. |
| 3. Searching for themes: | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| 4. Reviewing themes: | Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. |
| 5. Defining and naming themes: | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme. |
| 6. Producing the report: | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

**Appendix C: Thematic Analysis 15- Point Checklist**

**Table 2: A 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis**

| Process | No. | Criteria |
|---|---|---|
| Transcription | 1 | The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'. |
| Coding | 2 | Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process. |
| | 3 | Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive. |
| | 4 | All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated. |
| | 5 | Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set. |
| | 6 | Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive. |
| Analysis | 7 | Data have been analysed - interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described. |
| | 8 | Analysis and data match each other - the extracts illustrate the analytic claims. |
| | 9 | Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic. |
| | 10 | A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided. |
| Overall | 11 | Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly. |
| Written report | 12 | The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated. |
| | 13 | There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done - i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent. |
| | 14 | The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis. |
| | 15 | The researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'. |

**Appendix D: Research Invitation Emailed to Former BLAST Adult Participants**

University
of Windsor

Good afternoon,

You are being contacted because you have formerly participated in at least one *Project BLAST* event. On behalf of myself, Kelli Sirianni the *Project BLAST* coordinator, as well as the University of Windsor, I would like to thank you for your participation and support. You have made it possible for us to provide our students the opportunity to experience this day.

As you may know, *Project BLAST* is the focus of my thesis, *The Impact of a One-Day Social Event: Project BLAST* I am now moving into the data collection of this endeavor, and am inviting you, and all other staff members who have participated in a *Project BLAST,* to partake in my research. To do so, I will be conducting one-time interviews with individuals who have formerly participated in at least one *Project BLAST* event. Interviews will be a mixture of semi-structured, guided, as well as open-ended, questions, and will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Interviews can be scheduled during times most convenient for you and your schedule. The intent of these interviews is to use thematic analysis in exploring adults perceptions of the impact *Project BLAST* has on the student population in relation to resilience and sense of belonging, as well as to explore your own personal experience with the program and how it can be further improved for its future executions. At any point throughout this research process, all participants will have the right to withdraw, without penalty. I have attached both a research consent forms and an audio consent form for your consideration. In order to participate in this research, I require that both of these forms be read through and signed.

If you are interested in contributing to this bank of knowledge and becoming part of my research, please contact me via email at your earliest convenience. All contributions will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation assistance in this endeavor; it is one that is both personal and professional.

Kelli Sirianni, OCT
GECDSB
Sessional Instructor
B.A. Honours, B.Ed.
M.Ed Candidate
Faculty of Education
University of Windsor

**Appendix E: Research Consent Form (Emailed to Invited Participants)**



University
of Windsor

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Title of Study:**
*Project B.L.A.S.T (Breaking Barriers, Loving Yourself, Accepting Others, Similarities not Differences, Totally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools*
You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by *Kelli Sirianni and Dr. Geri Salinitri,* from the *Faculty of Education* at the University of Windsor. *The results from this study will contribute to Ms. Kelli Sirianni's thesis paper.*
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact:
*Kelli Sirianni*                                         *Dr. Geri Salinitri*
*519-903-7648*                                       *519-253-3000 ext. 3961*
*siriannk@uwindsor.ca*                          *sgeri@uwindsor.ca*

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to investigate perceptions of the impact of the event, *Project BLAST,* on student resilience and sense of belonging according to adults who have participated in the event at least once. These adults will include: administrators, teachers, guidance counselors/social workers/child and youth care workers, Faculty of Education teacher candidates and graduates, faculty members from other faculties and community members.
By aiming to identify aspects of student culture and social roles, barriers that interfere with healthy relations can be broken and the building of resilience can and should ensue.  Ideally, to build resilience in students, focus must be placed on the following three areas: (1) creating a caring and supportive environment, (2) high expectations for each individual and support to achieve them, and (3) opportunities for students to contribute in meaningful ways (Benard,1991; Hurlington, 2010). *BLAST* assumes to target all three of these resilience-building factors through the program's open and honest nature, with the order of events prompting participants to whole-heartedly engage throughout the day.  This study will investigate the reality of these assumptions according to adults who have participated in the event.

## PROCEDURES
You will be interviewed, and asked semi-structured, guided and open-ended questions on your perceptions of the *Project BLAST* event as related to student resilience and sense of belonging, as well as your own experience with the event. Interviews will be conducted at a time and location that is most convenient for you, and will take approximately 30-60 minutes. Audio recording and verbatim transcriptions will be used to ensure accuracy of data collection.
You will have the ability to withdraw from the research, whether it is from a particular question, or from the research as a whole, at any point in time, without consequence.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**
The overall risk for study is considered to be low, given that all interviews are conducted on a volunteer basis with individuals age 18 and over. You have the option of remaining anonymous with all responses, acquiring a pseudonym if desired. If at any time you wish to withdraw from answering a particular question, or from the research as a whole, you will be free to do so, without penalty.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**
This study will evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the *Project BLAST* event, which seeks to increase resilience and sense of belonging across students and the school culture. The result of this study will assist program coordinators in assessing the impact of this program, as perceived by these interviews adults, as well as aid in how to better this program for its future executions.
You will also benefit from this study by way of their understanding of school events and activities, and how these events impact school culture and climate. Participating in the interviews is a way for you to share their experiences and provide constructive feedback to the coordinator of the event.

**COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION**
You will not receive compensation for participating in the research.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. As a way to ensure confidentiality if desired, you have the ability to acquire a pseudonym.
All data will be locked in a secure place in the researcher's home office until all data has been analyzed and the report has been completed. It will then be erased and/or shredded.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
The study calls for you to participate on a volunteer basis. You will have the right to withdraw from particular questions, or from the research as a whole, at any point in time, free from consequence.

**FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS**
The overall results of the study, as well as the completed thesis, will be posted on the Research Ethics Board website of the University of Windsor, as well as shared with each participating board part of the study, this includes the specific schools of interest and its staff members.
**Web address:**
> www.uwindsor.ca
> www.publicboard.ca
> **Date when results are available:** September 2014

**SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA**
These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

     I understand the information provided for the study *Project B.L.A.S.T (Breaking Barriers, Loving Yourself, Accepting Others, Similarities not Differences, Totally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools* as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form. I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the research process be stopped. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone unless given permission and that audio-taping will be kept confidential. All data will stored in a locked cabinet and accessed only by the researcher.

     I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the audio-tape will be for professional use only. I have been given a copy of this form.


_____     _____
Name of Participant                          Signature of Participant


_____
Date

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.


_____          _____
Signature of Investigator                        Date

**Appendix F: Audio Consent Form (E-mail to invited Participants)**



**University of Windsor**

**CONSENT FOR AUDIO TAPING**

**TITLE OF THE PROJECT:**

*Project B.L.A.S.T (Breaking Barriers, Loving Yourself, Accepting Others, Similarities not Differences, Totally Inclusive Experience): Impact on Adolescent Resilience and Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools*

I consent to the audio-taping of interviews, procedures, or treatment.

I understand these are voluntary procedures and that I am free to withdraw at any time by requesting that the taping be stopped. I also understand that my name will not be revealed to anyone and that taping will be kept confidential. Tapes are filed by number only and store in a locked cabinet.

The destruction of the audio-tapes will be completed after transcription and verification.

I understand that confidentiality will be respected and that the audio-tape will be for professional use only.

**SIGNATURES**

_____          _____
**Research Participant**                                  **Date**

_____          _____
**Researcher, Kelli Sirianni**                            **Date**

| | Part. Pseudo Name | Gender (M/F) | Title/ Occupation | # of *BLAST* events | Involvement with/ exposure to *BLAST*: | | | | Role(s) fulfilled within the *BLAST* event(s): | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Current or Past B.Ed Student | Outer Faculty Member | If applicable, which Faculty? | Community Member | Student Part. | Student Fac. | Adult Fac. |
| 1. | Katrina | F | - Community Health Promoter - Teacher | 10 | Yes | Yes | Human Kinetics | Yes | | | Yes |
| 2. | Keara | F | Teacher | 5 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 3. | Chase | M | Teacher | 9 | Yes | | | | | | Yes |
| 4. | Will | M | Motivational Youth Speaker | 2 | | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 5. | Lauren | F | Year 4 BScN Student | 2 | | Yes | Nursing | Yes | | | Yes |
| 6. | Chris | M | Teacher | 5 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 7. | Erica | F | Teacher | 2 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 8. | Lee | M | Student | 3 | | | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| 9. | Colleen | F | Teacher | 6 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 10. | Rachelle | F | Retail Management | 1 | | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 11. | Stacey | F | - Student - Dental Hygienist | 2 | | Yes | Health Sciences | Yes | | | Yes |
| 12. | Owen | M | - Student - Teacher | 5 | Yes | | | | | | Yes |

| 13. | Ashley | F | Registered Nurse | 4 | | Yes | Health Sciences | Yes | | | Yes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14. | James | M | Student | 2 | | | | Yes | Yes | Yes | |
| 15. | Kate | F | - Student - Day Care Worker | 1 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 16. | Stephan | M | Teacher | 2 | Yes | | | | | | Yes |
| 17. | Martin | M | Student | 5 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |
| 18. | Matt | M | -Student - Teacher | 1 | Yes | | | Yes | | | Yes |

**Appendix H: Interview Questions (semi-structured)**

**Interview Questions for NON-SCHOOL/BOARD EMPLOYEES**

Please state the following:
*Name:*
*Gender:*
*Title/Occupation:*
*The school where you participated in Project B.L.A.S.T:*
Number of times you have participated in a *BLAST* event:
*How you got involved with Project BLAST:*
o   A Current or Past B.Ed Student:
o   Outer Faculty Member                           Please indicate faculty: _____
o   Community Volunteer/Involvement:

1. What do you think of the *Project BLAST* program?

2. What was your personal experience with *BLAST?* How would you describe the impact of *BLAST* on you?

3. How has *Project BLAST* contributed as a professional development experience, as well as bank of knowledge regarding to accompanying needs of students from this generation? Please explain.

4. What sort of impact do you believe *BLAST* has on student participants?

5. What do you think the students can gain from participating in this event?

6. How would you describe the event's short-term impact? Please explain.

7. How would you describe the event's long-term impact? Please explain.

8. Do you believe this event has an impact on student resilience? Please explain.

9. Do you think this event has an impact on sense of belonging school climate? Please explain.

10. Did you receive any specific feedback from any individual or groups of students who participated in the *Project BLAST* event. If so, please share what this feedback was.

11. Do you know of any specific students, or groups of students, who significantly benefitted from participating in *Project BLAST*?

12. What concerns do you have surrounding the *Project BLAST* event?

13. What suggestions do you have for *Project BLAST*, in regards to procedure and follow up, that would improve this program in its future executions?

**Appendix I: Student Feedback Form – Secondary Data (sample)**

*Project BLAST* **Student Feedback Form**

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your sense of belonging **BEFORE** participating in the *Project BLAST* event? (1 being low sense of belonging, 10 being high sense of belonging)

      1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your sense of belonging **AFTER** participating in the *Project BLAST* event? (1 being low sense of belonging, 10 being high sense of belonging)

      1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10

What is your overall feedback on the *Project BLAST* event? (What did you like, what did you not like, etc.)

Do you have any suggestions/recommendations for the *Project BLAST* event?

Other general comments:

**Appendix J: Adult Facilitator Feedback Form – Secondary Data (sample)**

*Project BLAST* **Adult Facilitator Feedback Form**

**Name (optional):**

_____

**Position (optional):**

_____


What is your overall feedback on the *Project BLAST* event? (What worked well, what would you change, etc.)




Do you feel that this would be a beneficial program to run with high school students? Why/why not?




Do you have any suggestions/recommendations for the *Project BLAST* event?

VITA AUCTORIS


NAME:                           Kelli Lynn Sirianni

PLACE OF BIRTH:                 Windsor, ON Canada

YEAR OF BIRTH:                  1989


 EDUCATION:

                                University of Windsor, B.A.,
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                                2011
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