

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Investigating the Factors of Resiliency among Exceptional Youth Living in Rural Underserved Communities

**“Schools that implement school-family-community partnerships can reduce the risk factors and begin promoting important protective factors by reaching out to parents and family members in order to create a more collaborative environment in the school, see families from a strengths-based perspective and reduce the isolation many families experience” (p. 7).**

## 1. What is the research about?

This study examines resilience factors in youth living with a disability from the lived experiences of working professionals. Little is known about the experiences of **exceptional youth** in underserved rural communities – youth living with autism, intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities who qualify to receive special educational services. These young people face significant challenges that may put them at risk of physical and/or psychosocial stress that can disrupt their wellbeing. They may experience isolation and financial stress, and lack access to critical services, including primary medical care.

Despite the challenges of living in an underserved community, exceptional youth can also develop protective factors, such as **resiliency**: an ability to rebound from negative or distressful circumstances and maintain a positive attitude or function. This study examines the risk and protective factors for developing resiliency among exceptional youth living in underserved rural communities.

## 2. Where did the research take place?

The study took place in underserved rural communities in Western New York State.

## 3. Who is this research about?

The study examined the resiliency of exceptional youth from the perspective of professionals that work closely with them, including special education teachers, general education teachers, and school counsellors.

## 4. How was the research done?

The researchers used **convenience sampling** to recruit 15 participants who were easily accessible and available to participate in the study. Each participant completed a demographic survey and a 30- to 40-minute semi-structured interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researchers analyzed the data by coding (categorizing) responses and then using these ‘codes’ to identify broader themes.

## 5. What are the key findings?

This study identifies three risk factors that can hinder the development of resiliency among exceptional youth:

- i) Students from low-income families or living in **poverty** may have a negative outlook or sense of optimism.
- ii) Families in rural areas may experience **isolation** and have limited access to resources and activities.
- iii) **Family instability** may impact the quality of care provided to exceptional youth.

Despite the challenges faced by exceptional youth in low-income rural communities, participants also identified several important protective factors, which can promote resilience:

#### A. Positive Personal Qualities

- i) **A positive attitude** when faced with adversity, which may present as self-confidence, positive self-esteem, and a good sense of self.
- ii) **Perseverance** in pursuing their goals, and assertiveness (i.e., the ability to stand up for themselves when handling difficult or uncomfortable situations).
- iii) A capacity to establish connections within their school and **seek help** (e.g., resources and support from school counsellors, teachers, and coaches).

#### B. Positive Social Conditions

- i) **A supportive school environment**, in which students have access to special education services (e.g., counselling and academic support) and after-school programs, especially sports.
- ii) **Adult role models** (e.g., family members, relatives or community members) who are trustworthy, positive, and accepting, and who support youth to succeed and overcome challenges.

#### 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research suggests that schools play an important role in supporting exceptional youth in underserved rural communities mitigate barriers and overcome challenges. By **taking a strength-based approach, reducing isolation, and fostering meaningful connections** with adult role models, schools can become an instrumental force in the promotion of resiliency. Youth programs and youth-serving organizations can also consider these approaches in creating positive social conditions for exceptional youth.

Practitioners must develop strategies that identify youth who may be most at risk of experiencing negative outcomes, and develop targeted programming that responds to their unique needs. **Foster hope** by promoting protective factors and **create a more supportive and collaborative environment** for youth by reaching out to parents/caregivers and other family members.



Curtin, K., Schweitzer, A., Tuxbury, K., & D'Aoust, J. (2016). Investigating the factors of resiliency among exceptional youth living in rural underserved communities. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 35(2), 3–9.