Risk Factors Affecting Academic Resilience of Elementary Students

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Abstract: Being able to survive and manage hard times, hostile events and successfully adapt to change or overcome uncertainty is often called resilience. Varieties of factors hinder students' academic achievement. This study was conducted to explore risk factors affecting students' academic resilience in a private sector elementary school. The study was designed to allow students to narrate their own perceptions regarding risk factors affecting their academics. Family background, parental, teacher and student mindset, over use of social media and lack of attention were key findings of this exploratory study. The need to overcome or bounce back against odds is to build or develop resilience among students so that they can well adjust themselves in society.

Key words: Academic Resilience · Risk Factors · Students' Perceptions · Mind Set · Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Being able to survive and manage hard times, hostile events and successfully adapt to change or overcome uncertainty is often called resilience. It is a personality characteristic and moderates the damaging effects of stress. It promotes adaptation to survive [1]. There are many definitions of resilience available in literature. Researchers have defined it in various contexts. It deals with the ability of people who are able to stay alive in difficult rather adverse times of discomforts and rebound to achieve success [2, 3]. In the words of Hart and Gagnon [4] resilience is "Beating the odds whilst also changing the odds".

Resilience is in focus of researchers for over fifty years. The last two decades made it a burning topic and it is the highly researched paradigm as more youth are at risk [5]. According to Goldstein and Brooks [5] the scientific research of resilience is not a simple one as risk factors are studied, understood and seen as in the context of other risk and protective factors.

According to Wright and Masten [6] factors that add the prospects of adverse consequences in future life are known as risk factors. On the contrary, those factors that enhance cushion against effects of risk factors are called protective factors. Both the risk factors and protective factors are present side by side and can exert their effect/pressure on the learner. If risk factors are powerful and dominate than learner is a low resilient person. On the other hand, if protective factors are stronger and take control over the environment, then learner becomes high in resilient. Chung, as cited in Rojas [7] described that people reveal resilience through their life experience. Family is considered both a risk factor as well as protective factor in many studies. Grotberg [8] studied role of family in the life of students. Family as risk factor and also as protective factor has a deepening effect on learners in academics.

Keeping in mind effect of risk factors that hider student's academic performance, this study was planned to explore risk factors in Pakistani context.

Review of Related Literature: The ability of people who are able to stay alive in difficult rather adverse times of discomforts and rebound to achieve success is termed as resilience. Wright, Masten & Narayan as cited in Goldstein and Brooks [5] described that studying resilience has progressed in four major research waves. The first wave or part of research on resilience is of course the introduction of the construct including method and other related concepts. After the introductory phase, in second wave vigorous research on resilience theory took place. The focus of third wave was on dynamic developmental corridors. The fourth wave, which is on rise now a day, is more focused on systematic approach and understanding in which individuals interact

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and grow. From identification of individual resilience to the emerging multi-level resilience research, a strong knowledge base has added in processes associated with risk or adversity and protective or defensive mechanism.

McEwen [9] gave a developmental model for resilience. According to him, while developing resilience one needs to develop four personal qualities i.e. mental toughness, physical endurance, emotional balance and purpose. Developing resilience is a personal journey and is a complex one. It takes time to be a resilient as its progress is a slow process. Being a dynamic process, resilience occurs in some context which results in interaction of man with environment.

There have been three key qualities of school that results in the promotion of successful academics, social outcomes and pay off threats like low socio-economic status [10]. The first among these is the kind thoughtful relationship between teachers and students which is built on mutual respect, safe guarding students from hazards and a thorough humane behavior in and outside classroom. This extended relation between student and teachers incorporates similar passion and feelings for their parents and thus creates an overall positive atmosphere in which students' performance increase. The second point is when prevailing situation becomes student-centered, then expectations from students becomes high. Learners are motivated intrinsically and resultantly; they strive hard by using their strengths and personal interest in the task at hand. The third quality of school then becomes purposeful participation of students in the variety of tasks taking place in the surroundings. Learners are engaged in meaningful manner. Once the caring relationship is working between student-teacher, teacher-teacher and teacher –parent then things go in the right direction. Students are provided ample opportunities to make their point, show their choices and work with their teachers and peers as partners, resilience level starts to grow in the desired direction. It all works as resilience-boost context.

Ginsburg and Jablow [11] describe resilience as a combination of seven fundamental unified constituents, known as '7-Crucial Cs' including competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping and control. These Cs are present in every child in a varied level. These are building blocks of children. It is the duty of elders (Parent/teachers) to help children grow and gain in confidence and recognize these inner potentialities and possessions. This self-reliance is an indispensable constituent of resilience and can be developed at any time in life.

Cefai [10] described three defensive and caring aspects that safe guard students at risk i.e. personal dispositional attributes, family and exterior support in the environment like school/college/university etc. Purposeful student engagement in and outside classroom activities is a vital defensive factor rather mechanism in learner's development both cognitive and social. One of the crucial job in resilience building is active involvement of the learner in such activities. The focus on learning than achievement grows confidence among learners. If learner is active and positively engaged then it satisfies learner's basic needs of success, competence and fun.

Academic and social challenges breed in the classrooms at almost all levels. Students face variety of encounters at educational institutes, homes or communities. These challenges exert stress and may deteriorate achievement level of students. Lack of academic achievement can cause student disenchantment leading to drop out from education.

The high-quality schools normally work to minimize rather eliminate causes of dropout for their students. One such activity was taken up in this study at hand, where a comprehensive plan was devised to enhance academic achievement of failing students. The researcher was part of the whole initiative from thinking to execution of this study.

This school (Where the study took place) had taken a good grade in recent DIQA (Department of Inspection & Quality Assurance) Inspection and met certain benchmarks to the satisfactory level of the team of qualified inspectors. New initiatives were also taken up by the school management to provide sound, stable and peaceful environment for both the students and the teachers. School building renovation plan was in process that made the building more attractive for the visitors. According to HM, the endeavors were made to make the school a center of excellence in student learning and achievement, through dedication and high-level commitment of the teaching and non-teaching staff for satisfaction of the customers. There are two terms in an academic year that works from August to May. It has its own curriculum, text-books and enjoys trust of the community. The school has its own teachers' training on regular basis that is run during summer vacation.

Statement of the Problem: In the field of education resilience plays a vital role as academic resilience refers to students achieving worthy educational results regardless of adversity. Those educational institutes which promote it use a comprehensive strategy for their

students. They raise the confidence of the staff members, take parents on board and encourage learners by providing them resilient moves in their environment so that risk factors can be minimized. In Pakistan, research on resilience has started to grow. The present study is designed to explore the risk factors affecting academic resilience of elementary students.

Objectives of the Study: The purpose of this study was to explore the risk factors affecting academic resilience of elementary students.

Research Questions: The questions that guided attention of researchers were:

- What are the risk factors that affect academic performance of the students performing below the required standards?
- How can academic resiliency skills be flourished in these students?
- How can risk factors be minimized/removed or change into protective factors so that learners can become academically resilient?

Significance of the Study: The findings of this study would be beneficial for teachers, parents and school administration. It would be helpful for teachers in many respects. Having insight into students' risk factors, teachers would be able to choose appropriate teaching strategies, will be able to guide poor and failing students in better way and adjust their teaching techniques incorporating students, individual differences. In this way, they will be able to motivate students to learn intrinsically.

It would help parents in the sense that the knowledge of their children's risk factors regarding resilience would provide them an opportunity to take measures to resolve these problems. They may modify their behavior and guide and facilitate their children more effectively. This changed behavior may yield positive and high self-esteem on part of the children and they would be more motivated toward learning which ultimately would result in better academic achievement.

It would help the school administration in creating a better school environment, removing risk factors, in which students would develop a positive mindset and become resilient that would enhance their chances of success in academic settings.

Delimitation of the Study: The study was delimited to:

- A private elementary school in Faisalabad city
- 18 failing students

Method and Procedure

Research Design: The researchers planned this exploratory study in a private elementary school. The study was designed in natural settings using interviews and observations as data collection techniques.

Population: The school in which the study was took place is a private chain school and has presence in more than fifty cities of Pakistan. In few big cities, it has more than one branch. The school has similar environment and as claimed by the owners and managing people, imparts same culture throughout the country. The population of the present study comprised of this school throughout the country. Other private chain schools which have similar curriculum and examination system may be included as the population of the study. As far as target population is concerned, this private chain school is sufficient as there are over hundred branches across Pakistan. It is run as an organization with same set of standards and procedures throughout the country.

Sampling & Sample: There were total 18 students altogether for whom this program was run in the school. Non-probability sampling technique was used for drawing the sample of the study. Class wise strength, age and gender of the students is displayed in Table 1.

During the academic session 2015-16 these students showed below the required level achievement in academics in variety of subjects that caused alarm in the school. These students narrated their lived experiences to their teachers and shared their stories of failures. Parents were taken into confidence about their wards academic situation through detailed parent-teaching meetings and the rehabilitation program devised for their children was also shared. After their feedback and consent, extra coaching classes were arranged for these students. The aim of all this effort was to work for the betterment of these students. Concerned teachers were asked to devise action plans to be implemented in such a way that the esteem level of these students must not shatter.

Table 1: Class wise Strength of the Participants

S.No	Class	Students	Age in Years	Gender
1	3	4	7-8	2 Boys
				2 Girls
2	4	2	8-9	Boys
3	5	2	9-10	Boys
4	6	6	10-11	4 Boys
				2 Girls
5	7	4	11-13	Boys
Total		18		

The Present Study: The study originated with focusing on teachers as they had to play a vital role in the successful execution of this study in school. To prepare teachers for initiation of study, two orientation sessions were designed. The purpose of these sessions was to describe the complete study to the teachers in which they were briefed about worldwide researches on academic resilience. The teachers took keen interest and showed their readiness to be part of study. These sessions helped in changing the mindset of the teachers. They were also provided printed leaflets having information about academic resilience. The most part of second session turned out to be a training session in which differentiated instruction was taken up in detail. During the session, it was decided unanimously that in the course of study differentiated instruction training sessions will be carried out in different slots so that teachers can learn how to differentiate objectives, content, process and teaching method in their teaching.

Data Collection: Assessment is a continuous process in this school. Apart from formative and summative assessment, regular classroom assessment is a key aspect and some weightage is added in final grades of a student. This not only helps learner to keep working regularly, but adds responsibility on teachers to remain proactive in teaching. Due to this monitoring system, number of students below standards is always low rather negligible. When some students showed low grades, it was difficult to absorb, so the data of these students was gathered and this study was planned and executed in the school. The end term result was baseline data for identification of these students.

Parents of these students met teachers and HM on result declaration day. They were asked to revisit school after a day. They were interviewed and causes of failure were noted down. They were told that a strategy was to be developed for these students and they will be consulted again while finalizing the plan of improvement of their children. As per promise, the 18 parents were requested again to visit school after the resilient plan was prepared. The finalized resilient boosting program was implemented after discussing with parents. Both formal and informal meetings with parents were made part of record/data. Certain school documents were used like letters to parents, report cards, student observation checklists and school diary etc. to communicate with parents.

Multiple ways of encouragement were used to enhance student resilience. Every student was asked to share his/her lived experience so that risk factors could be identified that caused hindrance for better academic performance. These students were asked to believe in themselves and they were continuously reinforced that successful learning is the artifact of continuous effort and determination that can fulfill ability.

Students were given confidence to elicit their lived experiences. They were asked to tell about their daily routine and interests. Teachers not only recorded these statements but also took notes while students were sharing their experiences. Teachers performed this activity not only in regular classroom but alone in private so that students could feel at ease to share their experience. The notes were shared afterwards to note down risk factors.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data: While narrating their experiences, students described many risk factors that caused their poor performance. Students of class 3 & 4 described risk factors like lack of parental attention and their family background as major causes of their lack of performance in academics. While students of class 5 & 6 termed teachers' mindset and lack of attention as chief causes of their poor performance. Students of class 7, the senior most of the lot, considered extensive use of social media and their own mindset as key factors of their below standard performance in academics.

After these narrations of the students, concerned teachers gathered data and discussed their strategies to handle the situation professionally. It was unanimously decided to devise action plans class wise for these students. The other outcome of this meeting of teachers was to strictly observe remedial protocols and strict compliance so that team effort must bear positive results in stipulated time frame.

The five classes in which this study took place contained half population of the total school. Six teachers along with the headmistress were part of this study despite 18 students for whom this resilient-enhancing program was devised and enacted. There were many attractive features of the school. One striking characteristic was the warm, friendly and energetic

Table 2: Risk Factors Emerged During Lived Experiences

| Sr. No.	Risk Factors
1	Family background & support
2	Parental mindset (support, encouragement & parenting style)
3	Teacher mindset (support, teaching method/style, feedback, inspiration/motivation & care)
4	Student mindset (lack of effort & ability, peer pressure, competition & personality issues)
5	Social media (excessive use of internet/Facebook/chatting & mobile phone)
6	Lack of attention from teachers, parents & peers
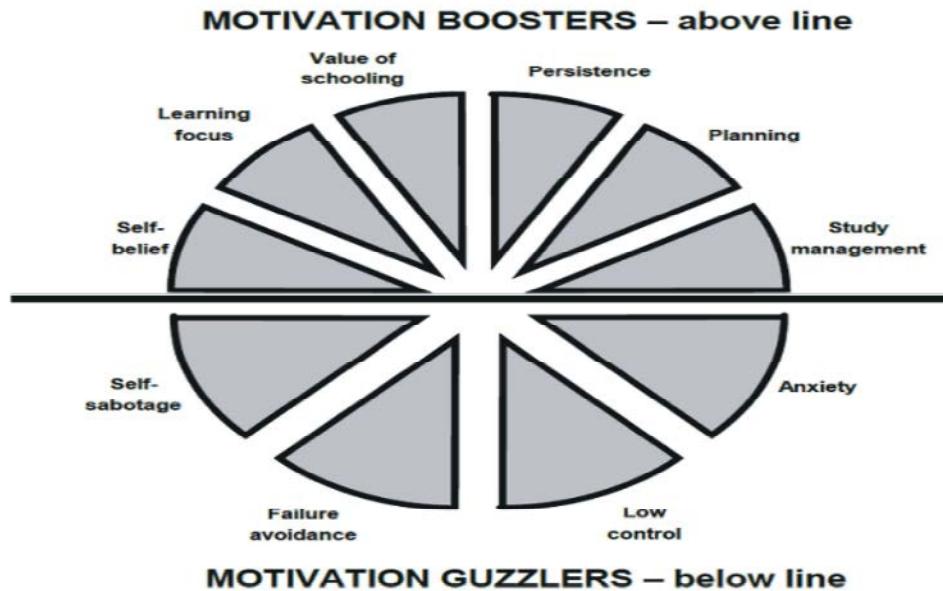
Fig. 1: The Student Motivation Wheel- cited in Martin & Marsh [13]

environment of the school that was the key for the successful outcome of the program. The HM and teaching staff were full of energy and ready to embark upon the initiative. Similarly, the ministerial staff was also supportive. The overall school environment was encouraging. The school building was not according to the required standards but the management of school utilized available space in a befitting manner. Students work was displayed in all classes that depicts that learning-teaching in school was effectively taking place.

Students narrated their lived experiences and various risk factors were described. All these factors were listed and were grouped accordingly. Risk factors are enlisted in Table 2. These risk factors can be converted into protective factors with professional effort of the stake holders.

The risk factors that emerged in live experiences are of varied nature/intensity and can be grouped around personal, family and social environment. These risk factors are with-in learner, with-in family and with-in society. The primary care-giver or family is the most important aspect that emerged in lived experiences.

The quality of relationship among the family members influence student resilience. The children in this study were feeling the lack of close family ties. When these ties were deeply investigated in parental interviews, it was found that parents were busier in other activities such as committee-parties, club meetings and social gatherings, rather than maintaining a cardinal happier family environment. Parenting style also mattered a lot and whatever students described in lived experiences was established in interviews. Neenan [12] advocates that it is the meanings that we attribute to incidents and not the incidents themselves, that govern our responses to them. This is why different persons can respond to the identical incident in a variety of ways. The students described various reasons to same event of being low performance in studies.

To flourish academic-resiliency skills among the students (Second research question of this study), the concerned teachers were asked to plan to create resilience-boosting classroom after analyzing the prevailing classroom situation and listening to lived experiences of their students. The teachers were

requested to incorporate four Cs i.e. confidence, control, composure and commitment while preparing their action plans to boost resilience among students. The teachers were also given briefing on students' motivation wheel given by Martin as quoted in Martin and Marsh [13]. The concept of boosters and guzzlers was explained in detail. According to Martin, (As quoted in Martin and Marsh [13] factors that enhance motivation are called as boosters and factors that reduce motivation are named as guzzlers, as depicted in Figure 1.

All the raw data were collected about students through the help of school staff and parents by teachers when they were busy in preparing their respective action plans. Simple checklists and questionnaires were used by teachers to gather information. Uniformed set of questions were prepared and were asked during parent-teacher meetings. This data was analyzed by researchers and further clarification was sought through teacher, parents and students themselves. Academic record was also made part of data. Biographical information was sought from school records, parental interviews, peer opinions and teachers' view point. Teachers were also interviewed in detail so that all the data could be elicited before making final conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to explore risk factors affecting students' academic resilience in a private sector elementary school. The study was designed to allow students to narrate their own perceptions regarding risk factors affecting their academics. The need to overcome or bounce back against odds is to build or develop resilience among students so that they can well adjust themselves in society.

The key findings of the study can be enlisted as a group of risk factors such as Family background & support; Parental mindset (Support, encouragement & parenting style); Teacher mindset (Support, teaching method/style, feedback, inspiration/motivation & care); Student mindset (Lack of effort & ability, peer pressure, competition & personality issues); Social media (Excessive use of internet/Facebook/chatting & mobile phone) and Lack of attention from teachers, parents & peers.

The study at hand is a story of persistence effort of the researchers not only to explore risk factors but also to mitigate them in the environment. The spirit behind this study was to give ample time and never giving up the effort as children at elementary level; test the nerve level of the adults especially at school. It was very important to remain patient and consistent for making it a success story. To develop resilience is a lifelong process and it varies in developmental stages of life and adverse situations.

Resilience is an attitude and attitude have three components including thoughts, emotions & behavior. Resilient attitudes thus breed thoughts once the situation is becoming adverse, tries to control emotions resulting productive outcomes. The resilience attitude can be built through verbal and non-verbal communication. It was a strategy employed by teachers in the classroom and outside in the school environment. They were provided participation in pro-social bonding so that students can learn how to build ties with peers and teaching community.

Borman and Overman [14] studied academic resilience in mathematics among poor and minority students. They not only formulated but tested varied models of risk factors and resilience supporting factors in the school. The results of their study showed that minority poor students faced more risk factors than resilience supporting factors.

Adversity is part of human life. Research on human life described that risk factors are part of life. The risk/protective factors in academics have both internal and external locus or a combination of both. Researchers recommend that as risk factors effect student's academic performance so both internal as well as external risk factors should be studied. Therefore, students with high resilient are compared with students having low resilience in various researches [15]. The risk factors elicited in the study at hand are also part of similar risk factors available in literature. In a study by Reyes & Jason, quoted in [15] similar pattern was used to study risk factors and it was found that students with low risk were more content with their school environment. It is very important to consider that no risk factor is an isolated factor rather one factor breads to the other and thus a negative outcome occurs in the environment. The extensive reviewed studies (1200 in number) by Durlak, cited in Abrams-Terry [15] came up with the idea that no individual risk factor should be perceived in isolation as causing a negative outcome in the life of learners.

[13] stated that academic resilience is composed of four Cs i.e. confidence or self-belief, composure or low anxiety, commitment or persistence and a sense of control. When attempt is made to deal with setbacks through

these boosted four Cs, learners effectively cope with the adverse circumstances at school. In this study teachers integrated four Cs into their teaching. Teachers provided caring and support to their students not only inside the classroom while teaching prescribed curriculum but also outside the classroom through value education and hidden curriculum.

Our study may have missed important indicators of resilience as it was based on perceptions of the students. The lived experiences shared by learners were the building foundation of this study. The process of educational resilience is a long one and it takes time to shape its figure. A longitudinal study may bear more fruitful results. The researchers may use some more detailed and focused intervention plan/strategies for better outcome. The explored risk factors can be turned into protective factors but it needs more time, support and energy on the part of researchers in future.

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