AT-RISK PUPILS: RESILIENCE, RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

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There is a great deal of variety, ambiguity and lack of uniformity in the terminology used in the at-risk pupils/adolescence research. Resilience, risk and protective factors are major themes in this field, yet disagreements are evident in regard to those themes. Social support of peers, teachers, mentors or significant adult is of great importance for at-risk pupils. Major risk factors are Poverty, destructive family dynamics and social exclusion.

Keywords: risk, resilience, protective, pupils.

Reviewing the literature regarding this phenomenon of being at-risk reveals the lack of uniformity in definitions and terminology. Various labels,-such as youth at-risk, adolescent at-risk, drop-out pupils, at-risk children and at-risk pupils, are used to describe or refer to a person at-risk. Mor [20;21] is under the impression that this lack of uniformity is not only a consequence of the complexity of this issue, but each definition reflects a difference in philosophical viewpoint, social concept and position, in the understanding of the factors considered to be responsible for the problem and the strategies needed for dealing with it. She concludes that most definitions of adolescents/pupils at-risk revolve around risk of educational failure and thus, in turn, risk of social exclusion. Poverty, destructive family dynamics and social exclusion are some of the major risk factors.

It seems that key concepts in this field such as resilience, risk and protective factors have multiple meanings occurring in the literatures, which are riddled with complexities, contradictions and ambiguities as Kaplan argues [6]. Few years later, Kaplan still argues that the “problematic aspects of the concept of resilience persist” [7].

Other researcher such as Curtis and Chiccehtti in their paper [3] reinforce Kaplan’s conclusion and acknowledge that resilience is a complex and multi-faceted concept. Masten and Obradovic [17] conclude that the difficulty in defining resilience clearly stems from body of literature that covers a variety of risk factors factors and manifested competences or protective factors across different developmental ages or life stages as well as domains.

McElwee [19] concurred “One continually hears the terms ‘at risk’, ‘risk’, and ‘risky’ associated with children and youth and their various behaviors but often without much clarity.” He noted that there are “…several unresolved definitional issues in employing such terminology in relation to school-going children” and asked “Who is at-risk? From what are children at risk?”

Despite this disagreement and ambiguity, Hanewald [11] claims that one of the strong features of the published research on resilience has been the identification of factors that relate positively or negatively as predictors of success in schooling. These are usually described as internal or personal characteristics of the individual and external conditions occurring within the individual’s social context. Both positive components are frequently referred to in the literature as internal/external protective factors or protective mechanisms. Equally, negative conditions are referred to as risk factors or risk indicators and individuals presenting with these elements are described as being at-risk.

Yet, Resilience, Risk and Protective Factors have become key terms in this research filed. Ann Masten, [16] a prominent resilience researcher during the last two decades, defines resilience as a dynamic construct that includes a broad class of phenomena involving successful adaptation in the context of significant threats to developmental and other life-course outcomes.

Others concluded that resilience is not an individual trait but rather a process [14], Masten, Best and Garmezy [18], in earlier paper, define resilience as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adapta-
Social adjustment [15]. Krips, Lehtsaar, and Kukemelk [8] posit that social competence is composed of dimensions pertaining to personality, appropriateness, communication, and human relations, thus highlighting a critical structure for sociometrics.

Inadequate self-esteem, low self-efficacy and dilapidated self-confidence are among those personality characteristics that might put a pupil into at-risk context or deteriorative situation. Recent at-risk research is focusing on resilience as a major theme for study which consists of, among other components, psychological processes.

Daniel & Wassell [4] provide a framework for describing resilience in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors consist of a secure base, which gives the child a sense of belonging and security; good self-esteem, which provides an internal sense of worth and competence; and a sense of self-efficacy, which is a sense of mastery and control coupled with an understanding of strengths and limitations. Extrinsic factors...
cover at least one secure relationship, access to wider support (i.e. extended family, friends) and positive experiences in playgroups, pre-schools, schools or the community (i.e. scout groups, musical bands, sport clubs, church groups). Interventions to promote resilience can target these factors in their design and implementation and as domains in which better long term outcomes for children are measured.

A child’s resilience is very dependent upon other people and other systems of influence such as their family, school, local environment and culture [25]. For teachers and other educational professionals it is useful to consider a continuum of resilience across multiple domains (physical, psychological, interpersonal) to be prepared for the child’s fluctuating capacity to function during their developmental years [11].

Conclusions and Reflections:
The ambiguities and the lack of uniformity which are evident in respect to terminology and definitions might become obstacles preventing from forming a cumulative extensive research structure that can lead to breakthrough in this field of study. This also might negatively affect developing effective intervention programs addressing this population of at-risk pupils/adolescents.

The significance of social support that emerges through research review emphasizes the necessity of addressing this aspect in any successful intervention program. Since there are several complex factors and conditions that can deteriorate a pupils to at-risk situation, and since some of these factors and conditions are difficult to resolve within an educational framework such as a school (i.e. poverty or destructive family dynamic). It becomes of high importance to initial early holistic intervention program that would assess and locate at-risk pupils at early stage, and offers those pupils a holistic therapy intervention that addresses directly and intensively protective factors.

A school can offer a little help when it comes to economical harsh situation of its pupils. Yet, a school can initiate educational programs of psychological and social support aimed to empower those pupils. And thus, perhaps enable these pupils to successfully integrate socially and flourish educationally.

Bibliography:

Prezentat la 12.06.2014