

AT-RISK PUPILS: RESILIENCE, RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS*Hussam Samara WATTAD**Universitatea de Stat din Moldova*

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 theme in this field, yet disagreements are evident in regard to those theme. Social support of peers, teachers, mentors or significant adult is of great important for at-risk pupils. Major risk factors are Poverty, destructive family dynamics and social exclusion.

Keywords: *risk, resilience, protective, pupils.*

ELEVII ÎN SITUAȚIE DE RISC: FACTORI DE REZILIENȚĂ, RISC ȘI DE PROTECȚIE

Există o mare diversitate de definiții, dar și ambiguitate, și lipsă de uniformitate în terminologia utilizată cu referire la situațiile de risc ale elevilor/adolescenților. Factorii de risc și de protecție sunt temă majoră în acest domeniu. Suportul social al colegilor, profesorilor, mentorilor sau adulților ar putea contribui la diminuarea situației de risc la elevi. Factori de risc sunt, în special, sărăcia, dinamica familiei distructive și a excluziunii sociale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *risc, capacitate de adaptare, capacitate de protecție, elevi.*

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 factor.

It seems that key concepts in this field such as resilience, risk and protective factors have multiple meaning 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 Chiccehti 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 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-

tion despite challenging or threatening circumstances. They believe that there are three kinds of resilience: "overcoming the odds" resilience (individual's personal strength to withstand adversity), "coping" despite a number of ongoing negative circumstances and "recovery from trauma". However, she and her colleagues point out that resilience is not a fixed quality, it is not something a child has or has not. Rather, resilience is fluctuating and varies throughout a person's development as individual and environmental factors interact and impact at different points in life [18]. Navigating through resources and negotiating access to resources matching a person's needs is therefore an important skill in the construct of resilience [26]. Masten [16] believes that the study of resilience emerged from thinking about the environmental protective factors combined with an innate human capacity for self-preservation.

Mor [20; 21] defines **risk** as a terms which refers to the level of probability that a negative event will take place, given a certain condition or number of conditions. She points out that an accumulation of number of risk factor predicts better results than a specific risk factor. As to **protective factor**, they are those factors that minimize the risk. The knowledge regarding protective factors is less than that regarding risk factors. And like them, protective factors can be person-related, family, related, community-related and school-related.

Social support in one of the most components of the resilience process and scales maintain this. Positive relationships with peers and other people in the community and effective parenting are integral to human adaptation system that contribute to resilience in children who experience adversity during development [16].

Therefore, it is not surprising those children with many risk factors who have positive development often have certain family characteristics: close relationships with parent, authoritative parenting style, and relationships with extended family [24]. Social support from teachers has a positive impact on at-risk children. Nettles, Mucherah, and Jones [22] found that elementary students from a high-risk, violent neighborhood who feel support from their teacher had higher math achievement and experience fewer effects from stressful life events. Social support can be also achieved by using mentor method in which at-risk pupils is mentored by an adult. Research suggests that not only that at-risk pupils benefit from this relationship, but also mentors experience significant personal growth, notable professional development; and valuable civic attitudes and engagement [9].

One significant influencer of socially conducive structure is school climate [1]. There are many factors that affect school climate. One of the most important factors is "the relationships that students have with their peers and adults in their school" [23].

Peers are an important resource for children and adolescents with many risk factors in reducing externalizing behaviors, and promoting higher achievement and other positive outcomes [13]. Increased, but flexible, group peer interactions with specific role designations have the potential to address peer relation and empathy discrepancies in ability concerning learners at-risk while modeling peer displays of self-control and adjustment [5].

Social support promotes the development of confidence in abilities and strengthens the skills that contribute to competence in their environment. Children who have greater emotional and instrumental support develop greater competence as adolescents. The initial and most proximal source of social support is family. Parents are naturally in a position to support their children and nurture their development [2].

Teacher support is an important factor for positive development. In one study, students who reported higher teacher support (had teachers who were role models, helped with school work and problems, and who cared) were less likely to use drugs, have friends who used drugs, and had fewer depressive symptoms [12]. In this context, it is important to notice that not only the school teachers can offer support but others such as school counsellors can play a central role in preventing, assessing, and intervening into student high-risk behavior [10].

Many of educational challenges that at-risk pupils face are brought on by low social competence or poor social adjustment [15]. Krips, Lehtsaar, and Kukemelk [8] pose 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.

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