



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ACADEMIC COMPETENCE AS A PERSONAL FACTOR INFLUENCING RESILIENCE IN SCHOOL ADAPTATION AMONG CHILDREN IN POST WAR CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Academic competence is indispensable in influencing resilience among children acting as a buffer that protect them from psychological distress. This study examined the role of academic competence in enhancing resilience in school adaptation among children in post war context using a sample of children aged 9 to 21years. Resilience Models and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) were used to guide the study. Academic competence was measured at by Interviews, Focused group discussions and teacher reports to capture children's' narratives on war experiences and academic competence. Children's academic competence were assessed using Academic competence Scale (ACS), adapted and modified. Descriptive t-test was used to analyze quantitative data while qualitative data was analyzed thematically by use of interpretative phenomenological analysis and presented in verbatim form. The results showed that majority of the children were low in academic competence at 95% confidence level. Only four items, namely; "I can work hard", "I can do well in school", "I can improve my reading ability", and "I know how I want to be", found to be at 95% confidence level. The study indicated that depleted personal resources as a result of experiencing traumatic events early in life (such as war), can pose a tremendous challenge in school adaptation. The study illustrated the necessity of interventions in post war context.

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INTRODUCTION

War exposes children to adverse traumatic events that deny children optimal development in all spheres of life. Children in war zone areas may fail to develop social skills or more importantly cognitively due to adverse psychosocial environments and this affects their resilience in school. Experiences of war are likely lead to problems that are social, emotional and behavioral in nature. As a result children growing up in protracted conflict areas have been found to struggle academically and eventually drop out from school compared to children not in war zones (Joshi and Lewin, 2004). This exposure to war conflicts may pose considerable threat to the optimal development of a child thus likely to affect school adaptation. Conflict adversely interferes with development of constructs that are important in school adaptation. For instance war exposure can lead to disturbances in cognitive functioning, emotional difficulties such as depression and anxiety, and behavior and peer problems, which has both direct and indirect effects to school adaptation (Broekman, 2011).

However, not all children in war conflict areas experience challenges in school adaptation. Some children have been found to manifest resilience and manifest aspects of optimal development despite the harsh environment they live in. Optimal development in children is partly manifested in children possessing good cognitive abilities, problem solving skills, effective emotional and behavioral regulation, and positive self-concept (Masten et al., 2006). Cognitive problems associated with exposure to war violence comprise trauma, which is one of the most direct threats to the developmental task of school adaptation. Trauma not only instills fear, but also makes people including children affected lose interest in many activities. This means that children in war conflict areas could lose interest in many activities that are important in school adaptation. However, children differ in the way they respond to traumatic events so some children are resilient and recover more easily while others have significant difficulties working through the trauma based on their protective personal factors (Kelley and Guill, 2013). Resilience refers to the idea of an individual's ability to cope with stress and adversity. In children, resilience is defined as the ability to continue to progress in their positive development despite being exposed to risk (Benard, 2004).

Children who are resilient have been found to manifest competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation or development (Kimaumann g& Rosser, 2011). In a school setting, resilient children may find it easy to interact as well as engage in curriculum and co-curriculum effectively despite the effects of war. Resilient students are able to apply relevant techniques and skills to problems, and are intrinsically motivated to conquer difficulties without suffering lasting harm (Bruele, 2014). Towards this end, it is possible that the students who find it easy to interact with the curriculum and possess skills that are academic related may be resilient to school adaptation despite the adverse war environment. However, there are limited studies that link academic competence in school adaptation especially in developing countries where violent conflicts are experienced. Studies that have been conducted on academic competence are mainly in developing countries that experience low violent conflicts with the focus on academic competence and other personal attributes. Splan, Brooks, Porr, & Broyles (2011) conducted a study on resilience and achievement goal orientations among undergraduate students in Australia. Students completed 7-point Likert scale goal orientation and resilience instruments. The study found resiliency, mastery approach, and goal orientation were positively and moderately correlated. The study did not look at the relationships between these constructs, academic competence and resilience in school adaptation.

Similarly, Bastug (2014) conducted a study to determine the extent to which academic achievement is influenced by attitudes toward reading and reading comprehension. The 24 study collected data on 1028 fourth and fifth grade students from primary day schools in the city of Nigde, using a survey method tested with structural equation modeling. Their attitudes toward reading were determined using the "Reading Attitude Scale for Secondary Level Students." Their reading comprehension skills were tested with open-ended questions, multiple-choice questions and cloze tests based on narrative and expository texts appropriate for their grade levels. The findings were that resilient students scored higher than non-resilient ones in reading and mathematics, which is an aspect of resilience. These studies were carried out in an environment that was not riddled with adversity. The present study sought to find out how various aspects of academic competence can enhance resilience in post war context to influence school adaptation. In this study, academic competence as an individual characteristic was investigated to help determine the relationship between academic competence and resilience. This was critical in designing strategies to help children cope.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

War has many adverse effects that affect children, and children of different ages may express themselves differently depending on their level of development in social skills. The research therefore adopted a mixed method approach and relied on a questionnaire and semi-structured face to face interviews and selected interested children in focus group discussion. There were 100 participants who took part in the study. The sample of the participants was drawn from 4 schools in Mt. Elgon sub-County of Bungoma County Kenya. The Participants were between the ages of 9 and 21 years. And in classes 8 to form 2. All children studied responded to questionnaire mainly standardized tools on resilience and academic competence, with a few 24 in number participating in the interview

schedule. The interview schedules were also conducted with some teachers in the schools that participated in the study. The selection of the sample was informed by the critical theory that locates knowledge in the material lives of actors (Mittleman, 2004). Descriptive statistics mainly frequency distributions and inferential statistics mainly t-test was used to analyze quantitative data. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to analyze the interview data collected. The choice of CDA was informed by conceptualization of the role of language in a social system as advanced by Norman Fairclough (2013). Fairclough sees CDA as a valuable approach in text analysis that can bring about changes in knowledge about various social issues that affect beliefs and values among others. In this study an attempt was made to create knowledge about academic competence an important construct that can serve as a protective factor in war conflict areas to facilitate development of resilience in school adaptation. Ethical issues specifically informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and respect to the participants were observed.

RESULTS

Resiliency Scale for Children and Adolescents (Prince-Embury, 2007), which is self-report scales was used to test the resilience level. The resilience scores were calculated based on the 9-item resilience scale (Prince-Embury, 2007). In testing resilience levels, only two categories were used (high and low) at an arbitrary point of 19, where high and low resilience scores were those above and below score 19 respectively. The summary of resilience scores levels are presented as shown in the Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Resilience Levels (High vs. Low)

Resilience level	Number of Respondents	Percent
Low resilience	69	69.0
High resilience	31	31.0
Total	100	100.0

As can be seen from the table majority of children in war conflict area of Mt Elgon are in low resilience at 69 % while 31 were in high resilience. It will be recalled that it was argued that war exposes children to traumatic events that adversely affect their development. This can explain why many children are in low resilience level. In order to establish the relationship between academic competence and resilience levels of children, t-test was used to test if there was significant difference in academic competence between the participants with low and high resilience. The results are shown in Table 4.2. As can be seen from Table 4.2, 4 out of 12 items on academic competence were found to have statistically significant mean differences between high and low resilience groups. These items were: "I can work hard", "I can do well in school", "I can improve my reading ability" and "I know how I want to be".

The quantitative results were corroborated with qualitative findings as shown in the extracts below. From the table, the children from a high resilience group had a higher mean of 3.81 compared to 3.41 on academic competence. This was significant at working hard. The effect of hard work was corroborated by the teachers as reflected in the quote below. This hard work and dedication could be observed in some students who performed well in school. For example, one of the teachers had this to say:

Table 4.2. T-test for resilience and academic competence

Variable	Low Resilience				High Resilience			
	N	Mean	95 % CL		N	Mean	95 % CL	
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit			Lower Limit	Upper Limit
Hard work	69	3.41†	3.13	3.68	31	3.81†	3.52	4.09
Don't try very hard	68	2.69	2.34	3.04	30	3.17	2.59	3.75
Pay attention	69	3.19	2.9	3.46	31	3.39	3.00	3.77
Do well in school	69	2.84†	2.52	3.16	31	3.32†	2.92	3.72
Don't take notes	67	2.78	2.41	3.14	30	2.77	2.17	3.36
I benefit from punishment	66	2.39	2.02	2.76	31	2.51	1.97	3.06
Improve reading ability	68	2.56†	2.20	2.91	31	3.06†	2.61	3.51
Setting targets	69	2.93	2.62	3.24	31	3.26	2.80	3.71
How I want to be	69	2.99†	2.69	3.28	31	3.45†	3.07	3.83
Failure to meet goals	69	2.86	2.52	3.19	31	3.09	2.60	3.59
Listening to teachers	68	3.10	2.77	3.44	31	3.13	2.73	3.53
Finding math difficult	66	2.56	2.22	2.90	28	2.35	1.77	2.95

† $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

“Ikoche has picked up well in class work, he stays longer at his desk studying, he is actively involved in study groups.....he thinks of becoming an electrical engineer..”

TR 4

Similarly another teacher had the following observation on students were committed to their school work

...they participate in classroom activities and mix freely with peers. You will find them busy in groups and they keep trying out problems. An example of Sarah, eh that one she does not fear anybody and whenever she gets poor grades she keeps on trying and working to improve...

TR 5

Further the importance of hard work as an academic competence in school adaptation was seen as a construct that helped students to engage in various school activities hence adaptation as exemplified in the quote below

...am very good at playing football, I love taking part in drama and soccer too makes me happy. I want to be an actor. my father was an army soldier and died while fighting...my father previously worked as a truck driver, he was a strong, quiet man. my older brother used to win all the games, one of the games was athletics, I would also like to be a winner playing soccer. I enjoy going to school and I like my teacher because he teaches us life skills. I want to study Science at University, and then become a soldier at the age of twenty...

Gregory, 16

From the table 4.2, the children from a high resilience group also had a higher mean of 3.32 compared to 2.84 from children with low resilience on doing well in school .Doing well involves completing tasks, getting good grades and successful performance at a given activity that would meet individual, teachers and parents' expectations. One teacher recalled:

...like Eddy, Davy is an eager, well-behaved and quiet boy. He always does his homework, except” when he didn't have a way forward.” Davy would then report the problem to the teacher the following morning, she helps him, and he would then do the work. He is usually among the top 10. He never fights with the other children at school, and he tends to make friends with those children who are willing to work...

TR 8

From the quote above, Davy (not his name) is a focused child. He is persistent at his work and does not allow bad company to derail him from working. He performs well in his class work. Successful performance can enhance self-efficacy beliefs and cumulative success can bolster the strength of those beliefs.

Doing well or achievement often leads children to engage in course of actions that cumulatively will lead to success that motivates the desire to fight on despite the challenges. For example, one participant recalled:

... I perform better in biology and chemistry. Even if I fail I will try again and ask the teachers. I always have someone to help me; my aunt, and three cousins, my brother and two sisters “To work” makes me proud. My cousin helps me with homework. I also see teachers...

Vallary, 13

From the quote above, it can be seen that doing well can engineer help seeking behavior to improve in performance. As Vallary observes, she is motivated to seek help from the teachers to attain her goal. This was corroborated by one of the teachers who observed that children who do well set goals and seek for help:

...Dorcas is a quiet girl who is not afraid to ask people at school for help if she needed something, was unhappy or felt sick. She always listens, and when she makes a mistake, she always feels very bad and apologizes. She tells me she wants to become a teacher. She has two close friends, one of whom is Mike. She enjoys playing with them, and never fights with others...

TR 6

From the quotes above, children sought for help and set goals of what they want to be. They also engaged in play and formed intimate relationships. As the students explained how they were succeeding in school, it was clear that they shared the ability to set goals, plan for success, and seek resources to assist them in executing their plans and reaching their goals.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the power of academic competence as a protective factor in school resilience. The attributes of academic competence such as hard work, academic achievement reading ability and future goals provide the students with engagement and motivation that the learners in war conflict areas to stay in school. Some of the characteristics of academic competence such as hard not only brings success but also makes the students engaged positively that fulfils state of mind that is characterized with vigor, dedication and absorption (Winston, 2013).Hard work at school is characterized by high levels of mental energy, which is likely to promote mental resilience. Motti-Stedfanidi (2013) observed that engagement leads to high energy that helps

children to exercise influence over events that affect their lives. As seen in the quote above, the students who are hardworking stay longer at their work, which would imply dedication and absorption that leads to development of self-confidence which helps build resilience. Accordingly, Motti-Stefanidi (2013) argues that engagement radiates energy and keeps up the spirit especially in a situation where there is low morale and frustrations. It will be recalled that children who are participants of this study have encountered many traumatic experiences that could lower the morale in school related activities. For example, some of the children who participated in the study have moved from one school to another, lost their valuable things such as books, friends, recreation and educational sites and loss of support from significant others. That means they have to start all over again to make notes, find new friendships among others. A hardworking child will be willing to do whatever needs to be done to get to his academic track. High energy and self-efficacy enables individuals to exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy will challenge children to set clear, measurable and achievable goals. Working hard in school could also mean that students have the capacity to undertake all the school activities. The preoccupation with both core and extra curriculum activities is likely to bring success that gives the children fulfillment hence motivation. The participants in the study showed that other than class work they also engaged in other activities outside class.

These extra curriculum activities appear to offer the learners other benefits that may include relaxation as well as acquiring life skills, which are important in resilience building. According to Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2007), equipping children with life skills helps to build their resilience. In the same vein, Kirsch *et al.* (2002) have demonstrated that children who engage and seek out activities inside and outside the classroom, leads to success or learning regardless of the environment or situations they have undergone. Similarly, Shehu and Mokgwathi (2008) observed that organized physical activities are protective factors that challenge and help young people to employ and develop their inner strengths and resources. Involvement in such activities has been shown to foster positive connection to peers and adults, enhance adolescents' physical, mental and psychosocial skills and protect them from a host of health risk behaviors (Shehu and Mokgwathi, 2008). Further, Cimmiyotti, (2013) agrees that engaged students learn more, retain more, and enjoy learning activities more than students who are not engaged. Students will only engage in activities that would get them good grades and bring satisfaction. This means that if students are satisfied they are more likely to be committed and continue their studies than unsatisfied students, who are likely to be less willing to regularly attend classes, and are more likely to quit their studies.

In relation to doing well in school, the findings of this study suggest that the amount of effort needed to be successful is important, potentially critical, to the development of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2006) that are key to school adaptation. Further, doing well in school is associated with resiliency skills such as academic confidence, sense of well being, motivation to succeed and the ability to set goals (De Baca 2010) that facilitate school adaptation. Accordingly Hamill (2003) and Motti-Stefanidi (2013) observed that learners who succeed believe in their own capabilities and exhibit confidence in their ability to mobilize the motivation and cognitive resources necessary to execute a specific course

of action within a given context. Moreover, Hamill (2003) emphasizes that academic achievement influences the development of self-efficacy, which is an effective protection against the harmful effects of a wide variety of risk factors such as war. Similarly, children who 'know that they can do well' exhibit greater effort to do tasks, hence they are likely to attract verbal persuasion, which can be derived from various sources including direct feedback on performance, appraisal from others, or from cues within the social environment (Waldrep, 2008). When children get positive feedback on their performance it enhances their self-efficacy which in turn influences development of resilience. According to Hamill (2003), self-efficacy beliefs can enhance human accomplishments and wellbeing in countless ways. Accordingly, success or failure experienced as students engage in myriad of school tasks influence the decisions they make about schooling. Doing well in school may motivate the student to stay on, hence school adaptation. In addition, students who do well receive verbal appraisals that are perceived as credible, realistic, and consistent with their perceived capability in a way that can bolster self-efficacy. According to Best Start Resource Centre (BSRC) n.t.d, relationship with positive role models enhance resilience development. From the social cognitive theory that informed this study, individuals are agents and proactively engaged in their own development and can make things happen by their actions (Bandura, 2006).

Towards this end, children who are doing well appear to achieve their goals and this helps build resilience. As regards reading skills, the study findings show that children in high resilience have the capacity to improve. Reading skill constitutes one of the three factors related to student success; namely, reading, writing and mathematics (Tillott, 2015), and it is accepted as one of the most marked and quick way of learning. Moreover, it is argued that an individual cannot be successful unless his/ her reading skill is improved. The ability to read and comprehend a text is therefore considered one of the basic conditions for success in life (Cimmiyotti, Caleb, &Bartholet, 2013). Increasingly, research seems to suggest that good readers (in general) perform better than non-readers academically (Lukhele, 2013). This helps build confidence in the learners enabling them to adapt to the school system. Lukhele (2013) observed that good reading habits act as a strong weapon for the students to excel in life. According to the study, effective reading is an important avenue of effective learning and reading is interrelated with the total educational process and hence, educational success requires a successful reading habit. The findings of this study show that children with this characteristic are able to undertake various school activities. Researchers like Bruele (2014), Tillot (2015), and Winston (2013) suggest that reading ability affects the academic performance of students. This helps in building self esteem of the students. Sweet (2011), noted that higher levels of reading ability and reading skills, as well as a higher level of academic achievement can be a direct indication of their level of self-esteem, which influences resilience to school adaptation. The findings therefore seem to suggest that schools need to help the learners in war conflict zones to improve on their reading skills. Future plans are associated with hope that counters the hopelessness that is associated with war conflict. Children who set goals are focused and deliberately ward off any competing forces in order to succeed. They will have to constantly review their academic progress in order to strengthen on the weak areas.

Such behaviors contribute to academic achievement thereby contributing to development of resilience in children. The futuristic thoughts as demonstrated in the quotes seemed to motivate learners to work hard in order to realize their goals. Motivated learners display optimism and positive identity in disposition and view of the future. Vasimalairaja and Gowri (2016) observed that optimism reduces the sense of helplessness and hopelessness that reduces motivation and problem solving, thus builds self-confidence, which leads to resilience in school adaptation. Children who are optimistic about their future possess expectations of themselves and others. Being futuristic, therefore, gives children a feeling of agency and helps them to plan a way to succeed. Shehu and Mokgwathi (2008) observed that such kind of children are able to overcome living a dreary life of mediocrity, repression, frustration and pain by taking responsibility of their lives, seeing life as an adventure to enjoy, and being action oriented. To this end, Children who practice thinking confident thoughts and make it a dominating habit, inspired by what they want to become, will develop such a strong sense of capacity that regardless of what difficulties arise they will be able to overcome them.

They are unrelenting when overcoming challenges within the classroom/school because they can exert control over their thoughts, hence are more likely to persevere in their efforts. Further the ability to believe in themselves and their perception that they are able to choose their paths in life make children to how hopeful and positive the students were about their educational prospects and life in general. The study found that the children believed their future was bright and success was available for them if they followed through with their plans and worked hard. Stephanie *et al.* (2014) identified confidence and hopefulness as a central component in the lives of resilient individuals, while Mehmet (2014) pointed to hopefulness as a key contributor in a person's ability to envision workable pathways in life and provide the energy for goal setting behavior. Sweet, Anne, & Harold (2011) found that an optimistic outlook and belief that success was possible despite obstacles was a key indicator of students' ability to overcome challenges and succeed academically. This may be a self-reinforcing cycle. The students experienced success in school that strengthened their belief in themselves and a positive future, which aides additional successful school endeavors.

Clearly the aspects of academic competence that were found significant in this study play a key role in building resiliency in school adaptation. While war conflict exposes children to untold suffering that arrests their development making it difficult for them to remain resilient in school for a better future, academic competence provides hope for countering the negative aspects of war to enable children work towards improving their future. Therefore, those who are responsible for education of children in war conflict or areas with protracted conflict need to take their role in enhancing academic competence of children serious. Accordingly, educators in war tone areas are best positioned to provide supportive environment that can enhance resiliency to school adaptation given that some of the children lose their immediate family members in war. The task of policy makers in education is therefore to develop policies that can facilitate development of programs that enhance development of academic competence in education. For practical purposes, the policy makers and the educators need to take into account that war exposes children to harsh environment that affects their

development adversely. For this reason there is need for including psychological programs such as guiding and counseling, psycho education among others to help children deal with after war effects. The teachers and schools should equally provide an environment that is conducive that can facilitate such learning activities.

Conclusion

The study has shown that the depleted personal resources (academic competence) as a result of experiencing traumatic events early in life (such as war) can pose a tremendous challenge in school adaptation. However, helping children improve in academic competence can work to counter negative effects of war on school adaptation. Therefore, interventions should focus on strengthening institutions that enhance academic competence in children. This may serve as a compensatory factor that could counter-balance the negative effects of growing up in a protracted war environment that challenge children's capacity to regulate themselves, hence affecting development of their self-capacity and thus adaptation to the school system.

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