



Building resilience of students with disabilities in China: The role of inclusive education teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Relate teacher agency to student resilience.
- Stress teachers' role in the resilience process of students with disabilities.
- Draw on ecological system theory to frame the study.
- Use both teacher data and student data in the analysis.

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ABSTRACT

The literature well documents that teachers facilitate the resilience process of at-risk students through building empowering teacher–student relationships. Much less is known about teachers' role in student resilience within an inclusive education context. Drawing on an ecological perspective, this quantitative study investigates the role of Chinese inclusive education teachers in the resilience process of students with disabilities. The study reveals that students with disabilities suffer from multiple stressors. Inclusive education teachers who show strong agency in resource-seeking can build the resilience of these students and promote their wellbeing in unfavourable conditions.

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1. Introduction

Exposure to significant adversities, whether individual or environmental, can place children and adolescents at risk of various negative outcomes across psychological, behavioural, educational, social, and health domains. In the face of obstacles, some children and adolescents have persevered, adapted, and thrived. The successful transition of these children and adolescents through life challenges and the “unexpected” outcomes associated with them have sparked a surge of international interest in child and youth resilience. In simple words, resilience

refers to “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990, p. 426). Over the past four decades, research has gradually shifted its focus of debate from the ontogenic, individualistic understanding of resilience as a personal trait to the ecological conceptualisation of resilience as a dynamic process of interactions and negotiations between children and their environments, schools included.

In line with the ecological perspective, this paper engages in resilience building at school level. Working with a cohort of Chinese students with disabilities, their inclusive education teachers, as well as a comparison group of no-risk students, the paper wades into the role of inclusive education teachers in building resilience of students with disabilities. Here inclusive education

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teachers refer to subject teachers or/and class teachers¹ who teach and support students with disabilities. The paper unfolds in several stages. First, it constructs its empirical basis by a critical review of the role of teachers in student resilience. Second, it builds its theoretical framework by a brief revisit to the ecological approach to child and youth resilience. Third, it sets its scene by a succinct introduction to the inclusive education context in China. Next, it quantitatively addresses two research questions: (1) What adversities do Chinese students with disabilities face? (2) What is the role of Chinese inclusive education teachers' resource-seeking activities in the resilience process of these students? The paper concludes with implications for future research and practice in the fields of child and youth resilience and inclusive education.

2. Literature review: the role of teachers in student resilience

In an educational context, some students achieve their academic goals despite the presence of stressful events and adverse conditions that statistically place students at risk of performing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). There is a steady stream of evidence pointing to the vitality of school in building academic resilience. For example, students living in economically depressed communities with high rate of unemployment, drug use, and suicide considered the school-based Learning Assistance Programme to be facilitative of their learning (Howard & Johnson, 2000). These students attached great importance to their school achievement, competence, and success, indicating that certain special school programmes nurtured their academic resilience. In addition to school-based special programmes, access to significant adults in school (e.g., teachers, administrators, counsellors, mentors, student aides, and school social workers) was found to buttress academic resilience of at-risk students (Christiansen, Christiansen, & Howard, 1997; Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2009).

Of all significant adults in school, “teachers, in particular, are identified as enduring socialising influences” (Johnson, 2008, p. 386). Caring, encouraging, and supportive teachers who function as mentors and role models (Werner & Smith, 1992) or builders of positive relationships (Liebenberg et al., 2016) are essential for developing academic resilience and improving academic performance of students at high risk, for example, impoverished students (Brown, 2014; Gizir & Aydin, 2009) and gifted, ethnic minority students from low socioeconomic status (Herr, Castro, & Canty, 2012). In situations where there was limited administrative support and whole-school attempt to foster student success, Sosa and Gomez (2012) found that self-efficacious teachers were able to build academic resilience of Latino American students. These teachers adopted a variety of strategies in their daily work, including academic support, encouragement, and expectations; flexibility and availability to students in need of help; as well as interest in students' lives and recognition of students' effort. Morrison and Allen (2007) summarise that teachers' everyday practices beneficial to students' academic resilience may include learner-centred pedagogies and activities, culturally meaningful curricula, social emotional learning, flexible and optimal level of challenge and high expectations, as well as assignment of

important jobs as opportunities for participation and contribution.

Beyond the academic domain, attentive and supportive teachers have also been commended for their contribution to student resilience (Benard, 1991; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979; Werner, 2000). Teachers' social, emotional, and academic support; their awareness and sensitivity to potential threatening situations; as well as their care, love, and protection in harmful situations can help build the resilience of homeless students (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002), expelled students (Coleman, 2015), and students living in economically disadvantaged communities (Howard & Johnson, 2000). In culturally and linguistically diverse school settings, teachers' respect for students' cultural identity is an important resilience factor (Brown, 2014). For example, teachers' respect for students' culture, religion, and ethnicity was of importance to the resilience process of Canadian, New Zealand, and South African students who had limited parent/caregiver presence and lived in marginalised communities (Liebenberg et al., 2016). Similarly, teachers who valued students' use of Spanish in their learning and who were sensitive to stressors such as racial discrimination and immigration status were highly functional in terms of building resilience for Latino American students (Sosa & Gomez, 2012). The aforementioned studies consistently indicate that the micro-level, everyday “little things” (Johnson, 2008, p. 385) in which teachers engage matter in building student resilience.

Despite the widely recognised contribution of teachers to student resilience, many problems remain. Few teachers have professional development training in building child and youth resilience (Russo & Boman, 2007). Poor teacher-student relationships and low teacher expectations can place students at risk (Dryden, Johnson, Howard, & McGuire, 1998). Some teachers underestimate their role in building resilience for at-risk students due in part to their “belief” in the deficit model that blames individual students and students' histories rather than the structural constraints (Russo & Boman, 2007). Discrepancy between teachers' and students' viewpoints of resilience can shake resilience building. In the study of Howard and Johnson (2000) where students exclusively articulated their tough lives brought about by learning difficulties, teachers tended to not believe that a lack of school achievement negatively affected student resilience. In another study (Russo & Boman, 2007), teachers perceived that they had sound theoretical knowledge of resilience and confidence in identifying protective factors and assisting students' resilience process. These teachers, however, were unsuccessful to identify students lacking protective factors owing to the discrepancy between their perception and students' self-reported status of resilience.

While there are abundant debates about the role of mainstream teachers in building student resilience, the role of inclusive education teachers in the resilience process of students with disabilities has not yet received due attention. Where this is not the case, research is largely centred on the resilience process of students with learning disabilities in Western contexts. For example, an early review (Dole, 2000) identified a set of resilience factors for students with learning disabilities. While the review confirmed the gravity of individual qualities and family resources, it was emphatic about the importance of social support by teachers who assumed the role of making a lasting effect on the lives of students with learning disabilities. A recent study (Harðardóttir, Júlíusdóttir, & Guðmundsson, 2015) found that teachers who used strength-based approaches, cooperated with other school professionals, and engaged parents in resilience interventions were able to attenuate school dropout and academic failure of students with learning disabilities.

Current literature has evidently contested the substance of teachers' role in building resilience of at-risk students. This literature not only provides strong empirical evidence on school-level

¹ In the Chinese education context, a certain number of students (maximum 45 for primary school students and 50 for junior high school students) usually remain in the same class as they progress. Each class has a class teacher who coordinates and manages all education-related matters of this class. Although a class teacher is also a subject teacher of a class, the focus of his/her work is the citizenship education, moral education, and values education of the students in the class. Class teachers perform such education through their everyday contact with the students in their class.

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