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# The role of resilience in assisting the educational connectedness of at-risk youth: A study of service users and non-users



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## ABSTRACT

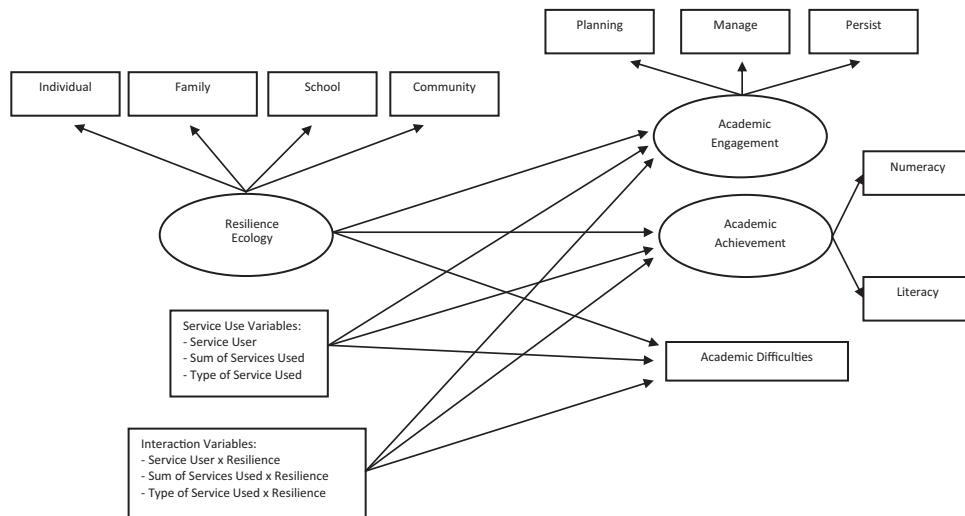
Many at-risk youth utilize support services, including educational, health, correctional, and community/family/youth services. This study investigated young service users and non-users, resilience, and 'educational connectedness' (academic engagement, academic achievement, academic difficulty). Structural equation modeling with 249 young people ( $M = 16.5$  years) showed that service users were lower in educational connectedness, while resilience was positively associated with educational connectedness. There was also evidence that resilience played a moderating or buffering role for service users. Specifically, service users' negative educational outcomes were attenuated once resilience was entered into modeling and there were significant interactions between service use and resilience such that resilience explained more variance in the educational connectedness of service users than non-service users.

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## 1. Introduction

There are many young people who are deemed 'at-risk' on a number of fronts. They access support, assistance, and advocacy from one or more services, including youth/family and community services (e.g., social worker, youth refuge), correctional services (e.g., probation, detention), educational support services (e.g., school counselor, school-based psychologist), and health services (e.g., pediatric support, addictions program, therapist). Relative to youth who do not require these services, young service users are at greater risk of mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, risky and suicidal behaviors, criminality, academic underachievement, and disengagement from the educational process (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). The present study focuses on the 'educational connectedness' of at-risk young people who use various educational and other support services. It examines service users' academic engagement, academic achievement and academic difficulties (collectively referred to as 'educational connectedness') –and the accompanying association between resilience and these outcomes and the role of resilience in moderating the potentially negative effects of service use on these outcomes. Fig. 1 demonstrates.

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**Fig. 1.** Service use, resilience, and educational connectedness.  
 Note: Models control for covariates (gender, age, ethnicity, SES).

## 2. At-risk youth and service use

Services and service providers may serve as facilitative environments to improve the outcomes of young service users. Research shows that when at-risk youth are provided with resources in the form of psychosocial services, many do well in spite of their personal characteristics such as low motivation, self-esteem, or sense of efficacy (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013). However, relative to the empirical emphasis on personal and intra-individual factors, there is relatively little attention given to the accessibility or availability of formal services that facilitate the positive psychosocial development of at-risk young people. Ungar et al. (2013) report that the social welfare system and services are largely “invisible” in research on the factors that enhance youth outcomes.

Approaching youth outcomes in this way goes beyond studying how an individual child overcomes problem behaviors and psychopathology. Instead, they are considered in terms of the ecologies of service providers and children’s communities (Armstrong, Stroul, & Boothroyd, 2005). What resources are provided to at-risk children, children’s access to these resources, and how well these resources address any problem behaviors and/or psychopathology, are all factors that influence children’s positive development when faced with adversity (see, for example, Dupree, Spencer & Bell, 1997). Taken together, young people’s outcomes are as dependent on what is built inside them as they are on what is built around them (Ungar, 2005). Educational and other services for at-risk youth may be considered part of these processes. For this reason, the present study seeks to examine the educational outcomes of young service users and non-users.

To fully explore the role of service use in young people’s educational connectedness, service use is investigated in three ways. The first is by examining the educational connectedness of service users and non-users; that is, considering youth who use any type of educational, community, correctional, and health service. The second is by examining educational connectedness as a function of the sum of services used; that is, considering whether the accumulation of multiple services use impacts educational connectedness. The third is by examining the role of service use type in educational connectedness; that is, for example, juxtaposing the educational connectedness of youth who use educational services with those using other services.

## 3. Resilience and educational connectedness

The role of resilience in at-risk young people’s academic outcomes is well documented. Resilient youth tend to “sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school” (Alva, 1991, p. 19). Other factors positively related to resilience are school engagement, pro-social behavior, mastery, autonomy, and problem solving skills (see Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1988). The present study continues this line of research by examining the role of resilience in the educational connectedness of at-risk young service users.

Consistent with Ungar and Liebenberg (2008), resilience is defined ecologically as “the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being [and] the capacity of individuals’ physical and social ecologies to provide those resources” (p. 12). Taking into account the individual attributes and social supports embedded within this definition, in the

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