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Promoting Academic Resilience of Undergraduate Students Through Effective Feedback

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to support the idea that effective feedback offers an opportunity to promote students' academic resilience, such as a positive attitude, optimism, ability to regulate emotions and see failure as a form of helpful feedback. In order to scaffold students' assessment feedback and effectively support academic resilience, the paper argues that there is a need for a better understanding of the nature and usefulness of feedback, and the feelings about feedback. The various perspectives of resilience, its risk and protective factors were put together as a framework for this study. The study design followed a qualitative approach. Data was collected from eight fourth year cohort of students majoring in Life orientation sampled purposively in the Department of Education Studies at a rural university in South Africa. The paper further targeted six full time lecturers at the same Department as the sampled students. Lecturers selected for participation in the research have more than 5 years of lecturing experience and previous exposure to and engagement with different feedback models. The research tools used were focus group interviews for both students and lecturers in a moderated setting. The focus group interview questions were narrowly tailored to the promotion of students' academic resilience. The findings from both participants' samples ensured a consolidated approach to the study. The study links opinions of both sample sets to provide an over-arching view of feedback practices in Education Studies in relation to the promotion of students' academic resilience. Both lecturers and students agreed on the nature and usefulness of feedback, and students' feelings about feedback. Lecturers aim to provide more support and guidance to students through engaging with feedback, to promote greater academic resilience.

Keywords: *Assessment, Feedback, Academic resilience, Perspectives, Risk factors, Protective factors*

1. Background

The promotion of resilience in students is becoming a hot topic in education and health at the moment and for a good reason. Developing resilience in young people is considered by many as the antidote to the epidemic of mental ill-health across our society today. The rate of students with anxiety and depression is of growing concern (Sawyer *et al.*, 2000) and the schools are uniquely placed to contribute to healthy student attitudes and self-awareness. The world has witnessed developments in different fields such as industry, politics, information technology, media, medicine and

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education. As a result of these changes, every area has undergone a process of transformation. One of the areas where this massive change occurred is the Educational sector. Educational sector is becoming progressively more dynamic in the global age. In the current scenario, the development of children around the world is threatened by a number of factors such as biological hazards, psychosocial hazards, climate change, diminishing social reward, major diversity such as extreme poverty, abuse. In the face of threats to child development, an integrated and global science of resilience by evidence based research is much needed to inform government and international policymakers to mitigate risks and build resilience in children. The resilience of a child to maintain wellness in academics and related aspects can be termed academic resilience. The study of academic resilience has drawn the attention of numerous educational investigators (Jowkar *et al.*, 2014).

2. The Concept of Resilience

Resilience in the educational context (Edwards *et al.*, 2016) is regarded as a dynamic process through which academically successful individuals can overcome the problems stopping their peers from being successful (Morales and Trotman, 2004), within individuals (internal) and between individuals and their environments (external) (Truebridge, 2016). Howe *et al.* (2012) described resilience from two different viewpoints. They provided the psychological definition of resilience based on which "resilience is a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (p. 543). Resilience as a psychological trait can be employed as "a measure of successful stress-coping ability" (Connor and Davidson, 2003). Howe *et al.* (2012) also argued that resilience from a sociological perspective can be endorsed or challenged by individual, social and environmental factors. From a social perspective, resilience is theorized as a number of social indices which signify the way of interaction between individuals and their contexts and the kind of chances and occasions that people may have to develop (Ungar, 2011). Shin *et al.* (2009) argued that resilience is a combination of psychological and social behaviours as types of dynamic factors.

3. The Concept of Academic Resilience

Resilience as a motivational-affective variable has a critical role in the academic field and has received renewed attention in Education. It is determined as both an incentive for attaining academic and individualized objectives, provider of adequate mechanisms to cope with stress and nervousness that happen in the University context (Cassidy, 2016). Consequently, schools and universities are responsible for developing learners' capacities and building up their resilience to be successful (Thomsen, 2002)

4. Academic Resilience Factors

Academic resilience has drawn the attention of investigators who inspect the methods of academic achievement for learners and notice and examine their cognitive and affective procedures. Individuals face various risk factors in their academic life such as chronic disease, financial problems, natural disaster (Masten, 1994). Despite the risk factors, some other factors called protective ones are significant in academically resilient learners' accomplishments (Rojas, 2015). Masten and Tellegan (2012) argued that protective factors contribute to the development of positive effects for learners and they categorized these factors into internal and external protective factors. Internal protective factors are associated with person's character whereas external ones are associated with one's social context (Foster, 2013). Fallon (2010) asserted that internal factors including self-efficacy and optimism are learners' positive attitudes toward adversity. Poulou (2007) on the other hand, defined external factors as the learners' social protection and support against the hardships. For example, the helpful teacher, supportive parents, a society that promotes a secure identity, etcetera can be declared as external protective issues.

5. Studies Related to Academic Resilience

5.1. International Literature

Internationally, there are two strands of literature that underpin the adoption of a resilience framework for the present review. One strand can be broadly termed positivist psychology construct and encompasses contributions mainly from educational psychology. Studies in this strand typically employ qualitative research methodologies, and find that students' belief in their self-efficacy and self-confidence are strong predictors of academic resilience. The second strand of literature comprises studies in education literature that uses large-scale assessment data. The latter body of work relies on quantitative analyses of academic resilience. Both strands of literature converge on the notion that psychological, sociological and a combination of psychological and social behaviours are amongst the most important factors for fostering resilience. A key limitation of all these studies, however, is that they are not able to make causal statements about the relationships between measured background factors and academic resilience.

Fallon (2010) examined the relationship between academic achievements with academic resilience for students with multiple risk factors. The study found a significant and positive correlation among students' academic resilience, academic optimism of schools, and academic achievements. Cahill *et al*. (2014) examine a range of effective ways schools can help build resilience and wellbeing in students. Cassidy (2015) investigated the nature of association between academic self-efficacy (ASE) and academic resilience. Mwangi *et al*. (2015) examined the relationship between academic resilience and academic achievement among Secondary School Students in Kiambu Country, Kenya. The study revealed a significant correlation between academic resilience and academic achievement. The significant positive correlation was found between learning environment and academic resilience of senior secondary students. In later work, Mallick and Kaur (2016) investigated the relationship between learning environment and academic resilience among senior secondary school students. Nguyen *et al*. (2016) study also demonstrated a significant correlation between L12 learners' resilience and experience of storytelling for increasing resilience. They pointed out that some protective factors for resilience include problem-solving skills, social competence, purpose, use of storytelling for improving resilience and autonomy. Drawing on social ecological resilience frameworks, Haibin *et al*. (2017) added adolescents' voices to explore how they achieve academic and behavioural competences despite being in high risk environments in a Chinese context. Mwangi and Ireri (2017) further explored how external and internal protective factors combined in predicting academic resilience. The findings of the study indicated that the external and internal protective factors jointly predict academic resilience. Casey (2018) analyzed the relationship between the perception of the existence of resiliency-building strategies in schools and levels of resilience and academic achievement among African-American Males in Secondary Schools. The results of the study revealed that there is a relationship between academic resiliency and the perception of resilience-building strategies. Sulong *et al*. (2019) conducted a study on academic resilience among Malaysian secondary school students-A confirmatory Factor Analysis. The findings revealed that there was a significant relationship between all latent variables such as school external protective factor, resilience traits and academic achievement. Iyanu and Omolola (2020) made a study on self-efficacy as a determinant of academic resilience among postgraduate students of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State. The results revealed that self-efficacy significantly influence academic resilience of postgraduate and also self-efficacy was capable of enhancing academic resilience of postgraduate students. Regarding resilience as a component of positive psychology, some investigations have been carried out. Singh (2020) investigated the essential resilience strategies adopted by international students in overcoming academic obstacles. The results of this study showed that international students develop resilience strategies through group assignments, in classroom settings, and by seeking University and personal support services. Kim and Kim (2021) found out that academic resilience is related to the various L2 educational issues including learning motivation. In addition, Rachmawati *et al*. (2021) revealed that general self-efficacy is the most important factor in the development of academic resilience in adolescents. Romano *et al*. (2021) examined the link between academic resilience, perceived teacher emotional support, and school engagement among high school students. The findings of this study underline the importance of encouraging resilience in the school context to promote student' engagement and prevent maladjustment. Wulandari and Istiani (2021) conducted a study on the effect of self-esteem and self-efficacy on the academic resilience of undergraduate students in Jakarta. The results of this study indicated that self-esteem and self-efficacy significantly affect student academic resilience in Jakarta.

5.2. Academic Resilience in South Africa

South Africa presents a particularly interesting context for studying academic resilience because compared to other countries it exhibits one of the strongest correlations between students' home background and academic performance. There are more existing studies on protective factors that are significant in academically resilient learners' accomplishments and result in positive adaptation. Dass-Brailsford (2005) finds that participants identified receiving emotional support and having positive role models as important in fostering resilience. Mampane and Bouwer (2006) find that resilient grade 8 and 9 students in township schools demonstrated independence, responsibility, assertiveness, sense of control, self-efficacy, planning and resourcefulness. In later work, these authors posit that schools play a distinctive and determining role in fostering resilience by creating a supportive teaching and learning environment (Mampane and Bouwer, 2011). In a study among African junior students, Kotze and Kleynhans (2013) specified that academic performance is significantly predicted by academic resilience. Mampane (2014) studies resilience among 291 students in township high schools and finds that these students attribute their resilience to self-confidence, an internal locus of control, commitment, being achievement-oriented and having access to social support. Willis and Hofmeyr (2019) finds that the constructs aimed at capturing self-confidence, in particular, are strongly associated with the probability of academic resilience in both Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) collapse. Willis and Hofmeyr (2019) uses a resilience framework to identify and describe the characteristics of students

from South African rural township primary schools who perform above socio-economic expectations in literacy. The findings revealed out that resilient students differ significantly from their lower-achieving peers along various dimensions, especially socio-emotional skills. Segalo (2021) findings reveal that resilient teachers concentrate on the wellbeing of learners rather than the behaviour problems Van Wyk *et al.* (2022) depict resilience as an important non-cognitive determinant of student success in first year students. Joubert (2023) proposes that culturally relevant stories as and inexpensive strategy should be utilised within the school community to promote adaptive and protective systems for at-risk learners. Schlebusch *et al.* (2023) examined the role of teacher resilience in enabling them to respond positively to challenges they encounter. The findings revealed that the most common challenges adversely affecting teachers' resilience were a lack of teaching and learning resources, a negative work atmosphere, and overcrowded classes. Malatji *et al.* (2024) major findings revealed that student-support initiatives played a significant role in ensuring that students were resilient during Covid-19.

While providing valuable insight into some of the individual and contextual protective factors that were important in fostering resilience, available studies are limited in using effective feedback to promote resilience.

6. Research Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative design with a descriptive approach (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 2007). The research was conducted in a moderated setting that was not manipulated. The sources in the study were divided into two, namely, primary data sources which is a real-time data whereas secondary data sources, relates to the past (Mesly, 2015). Study participants were chosen through purposive sampling (Uprichard, 2013). The selection was done deliberately based on predetermined criteria and the research purpose. Ten percent of the student population participated in the study. This equated to 9 of the 92 fourth year students majoring in Life Orientation. Only 6 of the 24 lecturers (with a minimum of five years' experience lecturing at a higher education level) participated in this study. Data collection techniques used in this study were focus group interviews for both lecturers and students. The focus group interview questions were narrowly tailored to the promotion of students' academic resilience. Data analysis followed interaction model (Miles and Huberman, 2007) interactively through four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusion

7. Context

This qualitative research was carried out at the public rural tertiary institution in South Africa. It is a state University that aims to find solutions for Africa.

8. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are reported according to the research purpose capturing nature, usefulness and feelings about feedback. It is important to note that the two components of the research were conducted within the same academic second semester. For the purpose of this research, the results of both participant samples have been combined (where feasible) to ensure a consolidated approach to the study. The study links the nature, usefulness and feelings about feedback of both sample sets to provide an over-arching view of the feedback practices in the Department of Education Studies in relation to the promotion of academic resilience. Although the educators' response rate was lower than that elicited from the student sample, the findings were nonetheless interesting and relevant to the study.

8.1. The Nature of Feedback

Based on data collected, staff and students agree mainly on the nature of feedback as being positive, constructive, timely, and comprise of strong and weak points. Bohndick *et al.* (2020) theoretical findings, indicate that feedback is conceptualised as coming from many sources. Bergil and Atlib (2012) in their study found that both teachers and students expressed the importance of giving and collecting feedback. In this study, the nature of feedback assists both teachers and students to get new insights, ability and develop competence instead of repeating errors. Both staff and students agree that feedback in any form should be specific, timely, frequent, supportive and constructive. Furthermore, Narcis and Huth (2004) in their study outlined a conceptual framework for feedback and found out that informative feedback has an effect on motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) and achievement. Effective feedback depends on factors such as motivation (Panhoon and Wongwanich 2014; Shute, 2008). Negative feedback has the ability to distort learning and performance (Fedor *et al.*, 2001). Data details students' agreement on the nature of feedback. It is evident from the data that student participants highlighted the need for feedback that is specific and individualised, and, hence, promotes engagement.

8.2. The Usefulness of Feedback

Students agree on the usefulness of feedback. Feedback is known to have a powerful influence on learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) but only if students make use of it (Winstone *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, Cohen and Singh (2020) discuss effective feedback as a marker for student success. In this study, students indicated the use of feedback to improve their subsequent performance. Arguably, students are in need of feedback to engage effectively in academic and disciplinary expectations. Overall, students were positive about the usefulness of feedback. However, the greatest criticism is that some comments are not usable. In order to enhance their usefulness, feedback comments should be future oriented, that is, looking at current performance with a view of how it can inform future action. Given that the purpose of feedback is to improve future performance, there is a need to explore further perceptions of feedback usefulness, both before and after assessment. Misunderstandings occurred for various reasons, including not being able to decipher messy handwritten comments in the margins of answers. The use of unnecessarily complex academic language poses a serious problem to students. Interestingly, Zhang and Zheng (2018) reported that some educators consider 'implicit suggestions using vague language to be the most useful feedback' p1129 arguing that they encourage students to engage in their own deeper thinking rather than being provided with answers others have noted. Hepplestone and Chikwa (2016) argue that there is a need for detailed comments for the students to gain useful meaning from them. The following formed part of staff agreements on the usefulness of feedback: Emphasis on marks for bursaries/ employment, revision for the next assessment and for better understanding.

8.3. Feelings About Feedback

Data collected reveals students' responses on feelings about feedback. Feelings experienced by students in relation to assessment feedback have received support from many studies such as Ryan and Henderson (2018), Rowe (2016). Students reported that receiving feedback was inherently emotional, permeating their wider learning experience positively and negatively. They struggled to receive and act upon negative feedback when it was often taken personally, linked with a sense of failure. Negative emotional responses tended to reduce students' motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem and promote biasness and frustration. However, some students demonstrated resilience and engagement in response to negative feedback. By contrast, positive feedback evoked intense but fleeting emotions. Positive feedback made students feel cared about, excited, encouraged, resilient, motivated, validating their self-worth and increasing their confidence. Students' feelings according to staff indicate that feedback is actioned with mixed emotions. Those who score low marks feel ashamed.

9. Limitations and Further Research

Study limitations include a small sample size. Research on this topic is still largely unexplored, the results of this study cannot be generalized and require further in-depth study

10. Implications and Suggestions

The term 'resilience' has drawn a wide attention of researchers in literature globally (Hiver and Solarte, 2021), however, it has not been thoroughly exhausted. Nonetheless, in recent years this notion has been emphasised by both researchers and instructors for its potential consequences. The related literature showed that positive psychology, protective and risk factors of resilience are effective in learners' academic achievement as they can raise the possibility of a progression or decrease negative consequences. This study emphasized the importance of effective feedback as a variable for academic resilience and that it can result in academic achievement. As a consequence, policymakers and lecturers should develop the strategies to boost the students' academic resilience. Given that the students' achievement is the leading aspect of education, the provision of strategies for increasing learners' resilience and motivation in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs by teacher educators can be useful. Similarly, lecturers are recommended to hold educational workshops considering students' resilience, their motivation and effects on their academic knowledge. They can also provide lectures about the way pre service teachers can increase academic resilience and motivation among learners during practice teaching. Finally, the significance of academic resilience and effective feedback may allow consultants to develop programs to increase the effect of these variables on academic performance. Moreover, further studies need to be done in order to conduct comparative studies between interpersonal factors in terms of different study fields and their relationship with learners' academic resilience and their motivational intensity. Owing to the multifaceted nature of academic resilience, some investigations should be conducted on other influencing factors other than academic resilience in academic achievement. Some protective factors can be studied for the future and their

relationship with academic achievement and learners' motivation intensity can be scrutinized in order to help decision-makers in education policy (Wang and Guan, 2020). Some positive psychology factors may also be studied for the future in order to contribute to effective feedback experience.

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