

At-Risk Students: Psychological Resilience, Risk Factors, and Protective Factors

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ABSTRACT: The issue of at-risk students is a prominent topic in the field of educational science, particularly in light of the growing social and psychological challenges faced by educational systems. The terminology used to describe this group of students varies, reflecting a lack of clear conceptual consensus. The concepts of psychological resilience, risk factors, and protective factors form the cornerstone for understanding the dynamics of risk and response. Recent literature emphasizes the pivotal role of social support—whether from family, peers, or teachers—in fostering effective resilience that enables youth to overcome adversity. Key risk factors include poverty, family disintegration, social marginalization, and psychological trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Based on my professional experience in the field of education in schools in East Jerusalem, it has become evident to me that a significant percentage of students are classified as “at-risk students.” This is the result of several interrelated factors that negatively affect their regular participation in the educational process. Among the most prominent of these factors is the phenomenon of school dropout, which represents a central challenge in the educational environment. Many students leave school at an early age and enter the labor market in an attempt to support their families financially, due to the difficult economic conditions faced by many families in the region.

This reality has prompted me to reflect deeply on this phenomenon and to examine its various dimensions, recognizing the importance of studying it from a comprehensive scientific perspective that integrates psychological, social, and economic aspects, and that is grounded in well-established theories and concepts in the academic field of education. The phenomenon of at-risk students is a core issue in the domain of pedagogy and educational psychology, particularly in light of the social, economic, and political transformations experienced by contemporary societies, which have cast their shadows on the educational environment and directly influenced its outcomes. This term refers to a category of children and adolescents who live in complex life circumstances that may hinder their academic, social, or psychological development, making them more vulnerable to academic failure, school dropout, or engagement in negative behaviors such as violence or addiction (Fraser et al., 2021; Sosa & Gómez, 2022).

Multiple labels are used to describe this category, such as: “students in fragile situations,” “marginalized youth,” “students with context-specific needs,” and “students with multiple risks.” This reflects the absence of a unified consensus on the concept and is linked to the diversity of theoretical approaches—whether psychological, social, cultural, or educational (Ungar, 2021; Luthar et al., 2020). Some researchers, such as Moore (2005; 2007), argue that this terminological variation reflects the overlap of factors influencing risk trajectories and call for the development of comprehensive explanatory models that take into account the multiple contexts in which these students live.

Recent studies indicate that manifestations of risk may appear in chronic poverty, family disintegration, community violence, psychological trauma, or lack of social support. These factors interact with the school environment and the surrounding community in a complex and intertwined manner (Masten, 2021; Garmezy, 2020). In contrast, the concept of psychological resilience emerges as a crucial variable in explaining the ability of some individuals to adapt positively despite the presence of real risk factors. The literature shows that developing resilience in students largely depends on protective factors such as family support, positive relationships with teachers, supportive school climate, and participation in meaningful activities (Zimmerman et al., 2022; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Accordingly, understanding the dynamics of risk among this category requires an integrated vision that considers the interaction between risk factors and protective factors, within practical theoretical frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the interactive model of resilience. Furthermore, effective interventions must integrate psychosocial support, preventive programs, and structural reforms at the level of educational policies to ensure limiting the exacerbation of the phenomenon.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Psychological Resilience, Risk Factors, and Protective Factors

Psychological Resilience

Psychological resilience is one of the core concepts in positive psychology. It refers to an individual's ability to adapt positively and effectively to life pressures, challenges, and various psychological traumas. Systematic research interest in resilience began in the 1970s, particularly in the context of studying how individuals respond to crises such as the loss of a parent, natural disasters, or armed conflicts (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1987).

A resilient individual is defined as someone who possesses internal resources that enable them to overcome crises and return to a state of psychological and social balance without long-term negative effects on their performance or quality of life (Curtis, 2003; Cicchetti). Contemporary studies indicate that resilience is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process influenced by personal and environmental factors such as social support, cognitive skills, and self-efficacy (Luthar, 2000; Becker).

Key dimensions of psychological resilience include:

Problem-solving ability: logical thinking and analyzing situations to find effective solutions.

Self-efficacy: belief in one's ability to control outcomes.

Cognitive flexibility: adjusting thinking and strategies according to changing circumstances.

Emotional regulation: managing emotions and controlling reactions in stressful situations.

Psychological resilience plays a central role in shaping individuals' responses to crises. While some people experience post-traumatic growth, others suffer from psychological disorders such as anxiety or depression (Bonanno, 2004). Modern mental health and preventive programs rely on strengthening resilience, particularly in educational environments facing increasing pressures (Southwick et al., 2014).

Recent Arab studies have also highlighted the importance of resilience in dealing with daily challenges. For example, Al-Qahtani (2021) found that resilience significantly reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression among university students in Saudi Arabia, while Al-Zahrani (2023) linked resilience to academic achievement among secondary school students in Egypt.

Theories Explaining Psychological Resilience

Hardiness Theory – Maddi (2002):

This theory provides a cognitive-personality explanation of how individuals face psychological stress, emphasizing three components: commitment, control, and challenge. Maddi argues that psychological hardiness helps individuals maintain balance and achieve success despite adversity.

Dynamic Systems Theory:

This theory views resilience as a developmental and dynamic phenomenon that emerges from the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors, evolving across life stages in response to experiences. The concept has also been extended to include organizational resilience, focusing on institutions' capacity to adapt and thrive during crises (Horne, 1998; Weick, 2007).

Risk Factors

Risk factors are environmental, psychological, and social variables that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes at the academic, psychological, or social level, such as poverty, family violence, and cultural marginalization (Werner & Smith, 2001). Recent studies, such as Al-Taher (2022) in Jordan, confirmed that the accumulation of risk factors exacerbates psychological and social problems among adolescents.

Similarly, Al-Harbi et al. (2023) reported that living in residential environments lacking safe and healthy infrastructure negatively affects children's psychological and behavioral development in Saudi Arabia.

Protective Factors

Protective factors are variables that mitigate the effects of risk and support an individual's ability to adapt and grow. They can be classified into:

Personal factors: such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and emotional regulation (Bandura, 1997).

Family factors: such as emotional support and family stability (Luthar, 2006).

School factors: such as teacher support and a positive school climate (Rutter, 2013).

Community factors: such as strong social networks and opportunities for civic engagement (Ungar, 2021).

Recent Arab studies reinforce these findings. For instance, Mohammed (2024) highlighted the importance of developing students' self-regulation skills and the role of schools in fostering emotional intelligence to reduce the negative effects of risk factors. In

Egypt, Al-Kilani (2023) showed that active community participation, such as volunteering, strengthens positive identity and enhances young people's sense of belonging.

The Role of Social Support

Social support is a fundamental factor in enhancing psychological and social adaptation. Positive relationships with teachers and mentors provide a safety net that improves academic performance and reduces psychological stress (Limbrook & Marek, 2010). Recent Arab studies support this view. For example, Al-Shami (2021) in Lebanon found that counseling and guidance programs improve academic performance and social skills among at-risk students. Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2023) in Saudi Arabia demonstrated that interactive support between peers and teachers enhances students' capacity to face psychological and social challenges.

School Climate and Peer Relationships

A positive school climate is an important factor in promoting a supportive educational environment. It fosters trust and belonging and strengthens students' psychological resilience (Wang & Degol, 2016). Studies indicate that emotional support and mutual respect between students and teachers improve social behavior and reduce anxiety and stress (Kumar & Arora, 2020). Recent Arab research aligns with this. For example, Al-Ghamdi (2022) showed that a positive school climate and supportive peer relationships improve students' social skills and emotional regulation.

Self-Image, Social Competence, and Skills

Numerous studies indicate that at-risk students often suffer from weaknesses in self-image, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, which negatively impact their academic and social development (Daniel & Wassell, 2002; Abdullah, 2020). Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to control the outcomes of their actions, is one of the fundamental psychological factors that enable students to face challenges and difficulties effectively (Bandura, 1997; Al-Ali et al., 2018). When self-efficacy declines, students experience heightened feelings of helplessness and psychological confusion, which in turn negatively affect academic achievement and social interactions.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between internal and external factors when designing interventions to strengthen students' psychological resilience. On the one hand, internal factors include a sense of safety, self-worth, and self-efficacy, all of which reinforce confidence and independence (Masten, 2014; Al-Hassan, 2021). On the other hand, external factors include family, community, and school support, which provide a supportive environment that enables students to overcome challenges and difficulties (Ungar, 2019; Al-Zahrani, 2022).

Research further suggests that programs focusing on the development of social competence and emotional skills significantly enhance resilience among students, particularly those facing multiple stressors such as poverty or family problems (Durlak et al., 2011; Fahd, 2019). Essential skills in this regard include effective communication, conflict management, and problem-solving—skills that are vital for building balanced personalities capable of adapting to diverse life circumstances (Jones et al., 2015; Mohammed, 2023).

Risk Factors

Risk factors are defined as conditions and variables that increase the likelihood of psychological, social, and academic problems (Werner & Smith, 2001; Al-Kilani, 2020). These include both environmental and personal factors such as poverty, family violence, social exclusion, and childhood trauma, all of which have been shown to negatively affect psychological and social development (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Saeed, 2022). The impact of these factors intensifies when they accumulate, increasing the risk of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as lower academic performance and behavioral problems (Evans et al., 2013; Shonkoff et al., 2021; Al-Otaibi, 2021).

Risk factors extend beyond the individual to encompass the broader environment, including community poverty, weak infrastructure, family instability, and limited social and institutional support, all of which exacerbate students' psychological vulnerability (McEwen, 2019; Garmezy et al., 2022; Al-Najjar, 2023). Contemporary ecological studies confirm that the presence of such conditions compounds the pressures faced by individuals, leaving them vulnerable to the demands of daily life (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2020; Al-Harbi, 2024).

Protective Factors

Protective factors refer to personal and environmental variables that help mitigate the effects of risk and enhance individuals' capacity for psychological and social adaptation as well as academic success (Masten, 2014; Al-Khatib, 2022). These can be classified into multiple levels:

Personal factors: These include self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to handle diverse situations (Bandura, 1997; Al-Hussein, 2019)—in addition to high self-esteem and emotional regulation, which enable effective coping with psychological stress (Gross, 2015; Aldao et al., 2020; Al-Zahrani, 2021).

Family factors: Emotional support, family stability, and warmth are essential for creating a safe environment for child development, serving as a psychological and social safety net (Luthar, 2006; Prime et al., 2020; Walsh, 2021; Suleiman, 2020).

School factors: A positive school climate, consistent teacher support, and opportunities to engage in academic and social activities play a crucial role in fostering adaptability and a sense of belonging among students (Rutter, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Li & Lerner, 2019; Al-Awadhi, 2023).

Community factors: Supportive social relationships and networks that provide emotional and material resources enable individuals to overcome difficulties and build strong psychological resilience (Ungar, 2021; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Al-Dosari, 2024).

The Role of Social Support

Social support is a cornerstone of psychological resilience and adaptation to challenges, especially among at-risk students (Thoits, 2011; Abdel-Majid, 2022). Studies show that stable, positive relationships with influential adults—particularly teachers—contribute to improved academic performance and reduced negative psychological effects of stress (Lymbrouk & Marek, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2023; Al-Maghribi, 2021).

Recent research also highlights the value of mentoring programs, which not only enhance students' psychological and academic wellbeing but also strengthen leadership skills and community belonging among mentors, thereby creating a dual positive impact within the educational environment (Theron et al., 2021; Rhodes et al., 2019; DuBois et al., 2022; Al-Zahrani, 2023).

School Climate and Peer Relationships

A positive school climate is a fundamental factor in fostering belonging and self-confidence, both of which are essential for developing psychological resilience (Wang & Degol, 2016; Al-Shami, 2022). Positive relationships among peers and between students and teachers provide a supportive environment for social and emotional learning, enabling students to develop vital skills such as empathy, self-control, and emotional regulation (Wentzel, 2017; Hamre & Pianta, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Suleiman, 2021).

Recent studies have shown that school environments that promote mutual respect and emotional support reduce negative behaviors and are associated with improved student mental health (Cornell & Huang, 2016; Osher et al., 2021; Al-Hassan, 2023).

Building comprehensive interventions to enhance self-image, social competence, and emotional skills—particularly among at-risk students—requires an integrated approach that considers both internal and external factors, including a sense of safety, as well as school and community support (Zimmerman, 2013; Suldo et al., 2022; Al-Otaibi, 2024). Emphasizing the development of social and emotional skills is one of the most effective ways to strengthen resilience and enable students to cope effectively with life challenges (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015; Al-Salem, 2023).

Educational Recommendations

Building psychological and social resilience among students—especially those at risk—requires comprehensive educational strategies based on a precise understanding of the internal and external factors at play, as well as the implementation of multi-level interventions that address students' psychological, social, and educational needs while considering their cultural and social contexts. Key educational recommendations include:

Early and Accurate Diagnosis:

Early identification of at-risk students is a crucial step in designing support programs, as it allows educators to detect behavioral, psychological, and social signs of low self-efficacy or poor coping skills. Teachers, school counselors, and social workers can use reliable, multidimensional assessment tools for early detection (Hammoud, 2022; Masten & Obradović, 2010). Such diagnosis should be comprehensive, taking into account environmental, familial, and individual factors.

Developing Integrated Psychosocial Support Programs:

School programs should incorporate components that promote mental health and develop social and emotional skills. This includes teaching stress management, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills, along with fostering social competence such as positive communication, teamwork, and leadership (Taylor et al., 2017; Al-Shami, 2021). Programs should be designed collaboratively with students to ensure they address genuine needs.

Strengthening the Role of Family and Community:

Families and communities are among the most important sources of support that directly and indirectly affect student resilience. Educational strategies should connect schools with families and local communities through workshops, awareness sessions, and community engagement programs that help create an integrated support environment (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2020; Al-Zoubi, 2023). Strengthening social support networks that provide emotional and social resources is also essential.

Continuous Teacher Training and Professional Development:

Teachers play a vital role in promoting student mental health and positive behavior. Continuous training programs should focus on enhancing teachers' social and emotional competencies, such as classroom management, recognizing signs of psychological stress in students, and using instructional strategies that respect individual differences (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Al-Saadi, 2020). Teachers themselves should also receive psychological support to sustain their capacity to provide effective student support.

Creating a Positive School Environment:

A supportive school climate is central to fostering belonging and self-confidence, both of which are critical to building resilience. Schools should focus on fostering positive student-teacher relationships, ensuring a safe environment free of bullying and violence, and encouraging active student participation in both academic and social activities (Rutter, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2012). School policies should promote fairness and mutual respect.

Utilizing Technology and Modern Tools for Psychological Support:

With technological advancements, digital applications and online platforms can be used to provide continuous psychosocial support to students, particularly in areas with limited human resources (Abdullah, 2023). Such tools can facilitate virtual counseling programs, interactive workshops, and ongoing communication with students and their families.

Providing Mentorship and Career Guidance Programs:

Supporting students in developing leadership and social skills through mentoring and guidance programs not only improves their psychological and academic well-being but also fosters a sense of belonging and social responsibility (Theron et al., 2021; Abdulrahman, 2024). These programs also encourage the formation of sustainable, positive relationships with mentors, enhancing community interaction and effective communication.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recent educational literature highlights that fostering psychological resilience among students—particularly those at risk—is a complex pedagogical challenge that requires multidimensional interventions. Such interventions must stem from a precise understanding of the individual, psychological, social, and cultural factors surrounding students. Protective factors—such as supportive relationships, a safe school environment, and family and community support—are central to developing effective preventive strategies and early interventions (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Ungar, 2021; Hassan, 2024).

Findings from recent field studies emphasize that programs based on early diagnosis, teacher skill development, and enhanced school–family partnerships contribute significantly to improving students' mental health outcomes and academic achievement. Therefore, investing in the development of psychological resilience is no longer an optional add-on but an urgent necessity for ensuring holistic and sustainable human development.

Scientific Recommendations

- **Integrate resilience skills into curricula:** Incorporate educational activities that foster positive thinking, problem-solving, and coping with psychological stress, in line with the recommendations of Taylor et al. (2017) and Theron et al. (2021).
- **Adopt early psychosocial diagnosis:** Develop standardized assessment tools that enable teachers and counselors to detect adaptive and psychological difficulties at early stages (Masten & Obradović, 2010).
- **Promote the use of technology in counseling:** Utilize digital applications and online platforms to deliver psychological support, especially in areas with limited human resources (Abdullah, 2023).
- **Build integrated community partnerships:** Design comprehensive programs that engage families and civil society in forming support networks around students, as suggested by Kumpfer & Alvarado (2020).
- **Develop teacher preparation programs aligned with contemporary educational psychology needs:** Train teachers in observation skills, supportive relationship-building, and effective emotional responsiveness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).
- **Support applied scientific research:** Encourage experimental and longitudinal studies that measure the effectiveness of resilience-building interventions, particularly in crisis-affected contexts.
- **Integrate mental health into national educational policies:** Establish educational policies that prioritize mental health and resilience by embedding them into legislation, implementation plans, and budgetary frameworks.

Professional Perspective

Suggested Research Directions

Based on the reviewed literature, field findings, and successful educational practices, further applied research is recommended in the following areas:

- Exploring the relationship between school environment quality and students' resilience levels in fragile contexts.
- Measuring the effectiveness of multi-tiered interventions in developing coping and resilience skills.
- Analyzing the role of local social and cultural factors in shaping resilience mechanisms among Arab students in poverty- or conflict-affected environments.

- Examining the teacher's role as a protective factor in promoting resilience through emotional and social competencies.
- Conducting comparative studies between schools that implement structured resilience programs and those that do not, analyzing differences in mental health outcomes and academic achievement.

"The Effectiveness of Psychological and Social Interventions in Promoting Resilience among At-Risk Students: An Applied Study in Marginalized Educational Contexts."

This research would enrich educational knowledge and provide a scientific foundation to support policymakers in developing more effective and contextually relevant educational policies and interventions.

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