Educational Resilience Among Asian Children in Challenging Family Environment

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Abstract

Given that most of the resilient literature tends to focus on Western contexts, and the western-based research may have limited applications for policy and preventions in Asia, this issue attempts to examine educational resilience in Asian or Eastern societies to complement the wealth of research in the western-based research. In Asia, a large number of children live in challenging family environments such as poverty, increasing labor migration, increased divorced and associated factors. Investigating the pathways to educational resilience, particularly focusing on the protective factors that can buffer the negative effects of low socio-economic status or dysfunctional family environments or migrant family environments on Asian children's educational outcomes has significant implications. In this research, we found that, in Asia, education is a key vehicle for individual's social mobility, and factors from the school, home, and community may increase students' chances of success by buffering the effect of some of the stressors from family on academic and personal success. This issue adds an empirical support from the East to Ungar's (2012) social ecology framing of resilience. This paper also provides evidence that suggests efforts by educators to promote resilience should be tailored to the unique risks to which a sub-population of children and youth is exposed.

Academic/educational resilience referred to individuals achieving academic/educational competence despite being in challenging or disadvantaged circumstances (Martin 2002; Masten 1994; Wang et al. 1994). Resilience is a two-dimension construct: exposure to adversity or risk and manifestation of successful academic adaptation (or better than expected outcomes) in the face of that risk or adversity (Luthar et al. 2000; Masten 1994, 2001; Rutter 1999). Exposure to adversity or risk could render an individual vulnerable to unfavourable outcomes (Kaplan 1999; Masten 1994; Rauh 1989). However, in recent decades, studies (e.g., Howard and Johnson 1999, 2000; Kaplan 1999) indicated that a large number of individuals who have been exposed to disadvantaged circumstances have achieved desirable outcomes. It may be because these individuals have some distinctive protective factors and the roles of protective factors are to mediate or modify the effects of risk (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000; Rutter 1985).

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The extant literature shows that the two constructs of resilience (risk and competence) and the protective factors are all cultural and context-specific (Kaplan 1999; Luthar and Cushing 1999; Ungar 2002, 2008a). Indeed, Spence and Shortt (2007) argued, an effective intervention or prevention program not only cannot ignore the risks children faced, but also needs to consider their gender, race, and class. As most of the resilient literature has tended to focus on Western contexts, very few studies have documented children's educational resilience in Asian settings (Ungar 2008a), and the western-based research may have limited applications for policy and preventions in Asia (Masten 2014; Ungar 2002, 2008b). It is therefore important to examine resilience in Asian or Eastern societies to complement the wealth of research based on circumstances in the West. In addition, given that large number of Asian children who are living in challenging family environments such as poverty, rising incidence of parental divorce, increasing labor migration, and associated factors, understanding childhood resilience has become a major priority for educational and social policies.

1 Risk and Resilience in Asian Context

The Eastern culture and contexts have distinct characteristics from those of the west. Currently, with rapid socioeconomic transformations, the gap between the rich and the poor in Asia has widened rapidly, and many children are living in challenging environments. According to Chatterjee (2014), there are more than 660 million people in Asia living in extreme poverty. Some countries (e.g., Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia) have more severe rates of extreme poverty than the Asia average. Moreover, in Asia, there remains a large section of population (60%) living in rural or remote locations where adequate food, water, or education opportunities cannot be taken for granted (Chatterjee and Ramchand 2014). According to the UN data (2016), secondary school gross enrollment ratio in Asia between 2008 and 2012, especially South Asia, was lower than the average ratio of the world. Recent studies found that in Vietnam, ethnic minority children faced many challenges such as socioeconomic disadvantage, a long distance from school, poor school quality, and linguistic and cultural barriers (Baulch et al. 2010; Glewwe et al. 2015; World Bank 2011). Meanwhile, many countries have an increasing number of peasants moving to urban areas to work. For example, in China, there are approximately 25 million migrant children who have accompanied their parents to the cities and about 60 million children have been left behind by their parents in the rural areas in 2010. All of these groups of children face enormous, though different, challenges in their education. Empirical research has indicated that children who are from challenging family environment such as low socio-economic status or dysfunctional or migrant families may be more likely to have lower school performance and drop out earlier (Cheng and Lo 2011; Hopson and Lee 2011; Li et al. 2011; Shin et al. 2010; Ward et al. 2007).

Recently, resilience is increasingly viewed ecologically (Masten 2014; Ungar 2011). Ungar (2008b) argues that resilience is a shared quality of the individual and the social ecology (e.g., families, schools, communities and governments). In the socio-ecological model of resilience, it is considered as a process that is negotiated discursively between the individual child and the ecological environment (Ungar 2011). As has been shown, family, schools and community factors themselves may not have independent influence.

A multi-systemic, coordinated approach to building resilience may be more effective than a program that is only school specific (Bierman et al. 2008; Webster-Stratton et al. 2008).

In many Asian countries, education has a long history of being a key vehicle for social mobility for individuals and the whole family, particularly in Hong Kong, Japan, mainland China, and Singapore (e.g., Li et al. 2017; Wen and Li in press). It is one of the more important drivers and determinants of individual resilience. For example, Pope-Davis et al. (2001) attributed the school success of Asian children to the Asian culture that values education and scholarship, industriousness and discipline, and parents' values for their children's education. Sun et al. (2013) have found a supportive school environment to be especially significant to students experiencing family-related adversities, including school boarders who lack daily family contact. The role of teachers' support is important to Chinese adolescents' behavioral and academic development, and psychological well-being (Davidson and Adams 2012) and negative effects of parental absence can be buffered by social support from non-parent caregivers and positive peer relations in school (Ai and Hu 2014; Gordon and Song 1994). Li and colleagues showed that when Chinese adolescents are in difficult or problematic family environments (e.g., poor parental supervision and family conflict), some protective factors from school (opportunities and recognition for pro-social involvement in school and the school's high expectations of student behavior) can be activated to prevent or moderate behavior problems and low academic achievement (Li, et al. 2011). However, these studies only offer a snap shot of the picture. Much remain to be unexplored regarding how education in the Asian cultural background helps Asian children and youth foster resilience.

2 The Purpose of This Special Issue

A better understanding of these factors at the individual, family, and school, which weaken the effect of risks on outcomes, has an important appeal as a candidate for public policy interventions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the influence that different individual and ecological factors exert on academic achievement in Asian context and culture (Ungar et al. 2017). The broad objective of this Special Issue is to use a social ecological model of resilience (Ungar 2008b) to expand the limited research conversation on Asian school children by identifying the protective factors from family, schools, and community that may contribute to fostering resilience. The papers in this issue provide a comparison of different challenges at-risk children facing in various educational systems, how children cope, and what resilience looks like in this context. Together, the papers use either quantitative or qualitative methods to investigate the pathways to educational resilience, particularly focusing on the protective factors that can buffer the negative effects of low socio-economic status or dysfunctional family environments or migrant family environments on Asian children's educational outcomes in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. Just as much has been learned from research in western contexts, we suggest this Special Issue would offer the west insights into the generality (or otherwise) of risk and resilience factors among children and young people in Asia. Moreover, an international issue of this kind can contribute to the development of effective policies and practices for promoting resilience across countries.

This issue begins with an introduction that provides an overview about the challenging family environment and educational situation among Asian children. As this is a relatively new topic to be investigated in most Asian countries, some papers focus on exploring the

resilience resources within school, family and youth themselves and others investigate the resilience factors for children from disadvantaged neighborhoods, rural areas, migrant families, and underprivileged social or ethnic groups. The special issue includes eight articles, which are organized into two sections: Part I, Resilience resources within school, family and youth; and Part II, Case studies: Educational resilience for children in migrant families, disadvantaged neighborhoods, rural areas, and underprivileged social or ethnic groups.

3 Part I: Resilience Resources Within School, Family and Children

This section of the special issue includes four articles. Together they provide a synthesis and analysis of what we think, based on research and practical experience, can create protective learning environments in school, home and community.

Ungar, Connelly, Liebenberg, and Theron (2017) begin by exploring how schools in different contexts and cultures influence student resilience. Based on previous empirical studies around the world and perspectives from educational institutions, Ungar et al. pointed out seven important resources that are associated with better developmental outcomes for children in school: (1) having necessary material resources such as financial assistance, education, and food, etc.; (2) having supportive social members such as friends, family, teachers and community members that can provide support when youth experience stress; (3) developing a desirable personal identity that would make youth focus on how they think of themselves and their personal beliefs, future goals, values and strengths; (4) children's experiences of power and control (that is, whether children believe they can control and change their lives; (5) adherence to cultural traditions; (6) experiences of social justice; and (7) experiences of social cohesion with others. This paper indicated that schools play quite an important role in developing resilience among children with the disadvantaged circumstances. The authors also mentioned, schools have many ways in actively or passively promoting resilience.

This paper is followed by a commentary by Arat and Wong (2018) who expanded on the third (development of a desirable personal identity) and sixth (experiences of social justice) resources proposed by Ungar et al. (2017) and made them more applicable for the non-Western youth population. In addition, the authors argued that investigating factors from the micro-(e.g., family support) or meso-level (e.g., community) is not sufficient for promoting youth resilience. Arat and Wong suggest two "new" resources: relationship with companion animals such as dogs because these animals made many social withdrawn Asian youth feel respected and loved in the society and invisible resources in the internet world under the web.3.0 era, that can be incorporated into the list of resilience resources proposed by Ungar et al. (2017). The two resources drawn from the recent studies have been identified in Asian context and culture, and they need to be examined further in the Western society.

The third paper by Frydenberg, Deans and Liang (2017) discusses the Early Years Productive Parenting Program (EYPPP). Participants were 17 families who came from diverse backgrounds including Sudan, Somalia, Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia (culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)). Most of these families had children between 2 and 5 years old, who participated in the EYPPP at a community playgroup setting in the inner metropolitan area of Melbourne, Australia. Australian children with CALD backgrounds were found to have poor English proficiency and are more susceptible to family violence, substance abuse and other problems (Parker 2009; Priest et al. 2012). This EYPPP program

aims to help preschool children and their teachers/parents develop a better understanding of the importance of everyday coping skills by delivering a flexible program to parents. The results indicated that CALD parents can benefit from the parenting skills introduced in the EYPPP programme. For example, parents are encouraged to: 1) practice positive coping strategies to manage emotions and communicate with their children; and 2) develop appropriate activities to enrich their child's development. The findings also indicated that practical resources, such as Early Years Coping Cards and Parenting Tip Sheets, to support communication between parents and children especially played a very important role in the children's resilience.

In the fourth paper, Chee (2017) examined media discourse of academic adversity and resilience to understand the determinants of educational resilience. As Chee stated, in Hong Kong, academic competition is very intense, with only 20% of high school graduates having a chance to study in the university. Therefore, students and their parents seek many ways to prevent them from 'losing at the starting line'. This paper analyses how mass media represented the stories of academic failure, success, and resilience among those "at-risk" students. Chee drew data from news reports from 17 major Hong Kong local newspapers (15 Chinese-medium and 2 English-medium). From 2005 to 2014, all news reports on success stories of "at-risk" students in the university entrance examination were collected and analysed. Results indicated that individual attributes and attitudes such as diligence, endurance, perseverance and will power and support from significant others, especially parents, were regarded by these students as two most important protective factors that overcame difficulties. However, the author found these Hong Kong students regard their families as a motivational force rather than a protective factor. That is, family was depicted as a driving force that gave the students an aim to strive hard for, but the family itself did not necessarily provide protection. This research also noted that these disadvantaged Hong Kong adolescents seldom mention the importance of environmental protective factors such as community and social support. Another interesting result found was that these adolescents interpreted their circumstances in different ways. Some students regarded adversities as a misfortune and found themselves struggling hard, and others accepted their difficulties as a part of life and thought that everybody had difficulties he or she has to face. At the end of this paper, the author reminds us that, identifying personal qualities and the effective environmental resources from family, school, community, or society can inform effective intervention for academic resilience.

4 Part II, Case Studies: Educational Resilience for Children from Migrant Families, Disadvantaged Neighbourhood, Rural Areas, and Underprivileged Social or Ethnic Groups

Four articles are included in this section. They address the theoretical understandings and research insights related to the importance of resources in fostering educational resilience among children from migrant families, disadvantaged neighbourhood, rural areas, and underprivileged social or ethnic groups in Asia.

Li and Yeung (2017) investigate the factors that help Chinese children from families in rural areas where there are substantial disadvantages to overcome institutional barriers to achieve educational resilience. Despite the rapid urbanization in China over the last few decades, by 2014, there was still half of the population (45.2%) living in rural or remote area (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2015). This paper utilized data from the 2012

Chinese Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a national longitudinal general social survey project with a nationally representative sample of more than 16,000 Chinese families in 25 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions in mainland China. There are 1212 10–15 year-old Chinese children included in this analysis. Among them, 57.2% are primary school students. Results showed that all school and individual variables and some of family variables (e.g., family SES, educational cost and parental supervision) were protective factors that made rural students academically resilient. Family environment, having parents who checking children's homework, and parental expectation had no significant influences on rural students' cognitive abilities. Overall, results show that family variables explained a slightly higher proportion of variance in cognitive scores than school and individual variables. It may be because Chinese families tend to value education highly and invest more family resources in their children's education. These results show that, the negative effects of rural conditions (socio-economic disadvantage or lack of educational resources) can be buffered by having supportive family and school environments. This suggests that efforts to improve rural children's cognitive skills should not only improve the quality of education, but also focus on efforts to improve family's economic and educational resources.

In the second paper, Das (2018) explored educational resilience among children from disadvantaged social groups in India because these socially excluded groups have a marginal status in India. This research employed the data from the first wave of the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2005 (Desai et al. 2009), which is a nationally representative sample of 41,550 households in 1503 villages and 971 urban neighborhoods from 25 states and union territories, in India. About 12,300 children aged 8–11 years were included in this research. The results found the effect of group membership on child's test performance is most strongly mediated through structural factors such as household assets and consumption poverty. Among the three social groups, the effect is strongest in the case of the Scheduled Tribes, which indicated the importance of the economic consequences of social exclusion in the context of India. In general, this research found that enjoying school is the only important school factor for all cases. It may be because these socially excluded groups have received little attention by the Indian government and have not benefitted much from the education policy. For example, school resources for these groups (the number of schools, school facilities, free textbooks, and teacher training etc.) are very limited. Therefore, enjoying school may motivate children in these groups to study. The research also did not find that caring relationship with teachers and communicating high expectations from teachers are particularly important for these socially excluded groups in India. The author interpreted this finding as a result of the low expectations of children from teachers in these social groups.

The third paper is about Vietnam's ethnic minorities' educational success by Trieu and Jayakody (2018). According to World Bank (2015), in 2014, 50% of the poor Vietnamese were comprised of the ethnic minorities, thus family poverty is the most challenging factor for Vietnam's ethnic minority students to receive education. This research employed a mixed method to explore and understand some of the challenges and protective factors affecting ethnic minorities' upper-secondary educational success. The quantitative data were drawn from the Families and Communities in Transition (FACT) from 2012 to 2015. The FACT was chosen because the sample includes adolescents aged 15 and above, drawn from 16 Thai villages in remote, rural areas with little infrastructure in Nghe An, the second largest population of Thai. Quantitative results indicated that, a high level of youth's perceived parental care is important protective factors for upper-secondary enrollment. Marriage before age 18, growing up in a low-wealth household, parents' having lower than an upper-secondary education, and having a high proportion of peers who had dropped

out in the youth's village are risk factors that prevented the Thai youth from enrolling. Moreover, child labor was the most common reason for school dropout among Thai youths. The qualitative data include focus group discussions and intensive interviews. Forty-two Thai youths, half of them enrolled in school, were interviewed. Unable to afford the tuition, making money for family, living far from school, early marriage, poor school performance, being bullied and teased, and having parents who do not value education are important factors for youth to drop out of schools. On the contrary, having supportive parents, prestigious or highly-educated relatives, highly-educated peers, and having a positive personal attitude toward education can help ethnic minority youths complete the upper-secondary education.

The fourth paper in Part II was written by Hu (2017), who employed a mixed-method to explore educational resilience among Chinese left-behind children. In China, because of rural-to-urban labor migration, almost 40% of the rural children are left behind by their parents. This study employ data collected from 452 year-9 students, their parents/caregivers, teachers, and school administrators in a migrant-sending county in a province in central China—Hubei. Results found that, when adolescents' gender, age, father's education, family wealth status, and school-level factors were controlled, there were no significant differences in adolescents' dedication to study and Chinese language test scores between left-behind children and those rural children who lived with both parents. Insights from the qualitative data collected from 38 students reveal that, most left-behind children understand that their parents' labor migration is the next best way for their parents to demonstrate love and care to them because their parents go out to find better economic opportunities in the hope of securing a better future for themselves. Because of these perceptions, many left-behind children feel grateful, rather than resentful, to their parents. The communication back home via mobile phones also help alleviate the negative consequences of parental absence under these circumstances.

5 Conclusion

In this Special Issue, we provided new empirical research to advance knowledge about educational resilience among children in different Asian countries. Understanding how Asian children from challenging environments manage to overcome barriers and succeed educationally can provide important insights for policy interventions for educators to address educational disparity.

Overall, the findings show both similarities and differences from those found in western societies, adding new support from Asia to Ungar's (2012) social ecology framework of resilience. These studies provide theoretical and empirical evidence for the idea that schools and families can facilitate students' access to individual, relational and contextual resources that are conducive to better academic performance. Consistent with previous findings, this collection of papers found support from the family, parental academic expectation and help, having a close bond to school, and in a positive school and classroom learning environment are important factors that enhance academic outcomes. We also found that, for Asian children from low socio-economic status or dysfunctional/migrant families, commitment to education or having a positive attitude toward education, and holding a positive view about oneself appear to be robust predictors of educational resilience. These papers make the case that educational institutions, in collaboration with families and communities, can be a form of intervention by buffering some of

the stressors from family to improve children's resilience. Preventing youth from dropping out of school prematurely and improving academic environment among children who live in challenging family environments are important to increase educational resilience among children and youth.

Articles in this Special Issue illustrate that resilience factors are influenced by particular social-cultural contexts, and the protective factors are not unique for the disadvantaged groups from different social-cultural contexts. For example, In China, studying in a "key" school plays an important role in building educational resilience among Chinese left-behind adolescents and rural students because the key schools are better than other government or private schools in teacher quality, equipment, and funds. In India and Vietnam, schools fail to provide an environment that can create resources necessary for resilience for the socially excluded groups. This is because many teachers come from relatively privileged groups, and they usually have low expectations for children from these socially disadvantaged groups. Moreover, many socially excluded children live in remote areas where schools have poor infrastructure, and they face language barrier because the medium of instruction is often not their preferred language. Worse still, schools for the socially excluded children provide education that is difficult to integrate with the mainstream education. As we know, for the disadvantaged children (such as rural children and socially excluded children), having limited educational resources is an obstacle to their academic success. They have lower schooling years (e.g., Scheduled Tribes in India have only 2.2 years) compared to other social groups. Therefore, when resources within themselves and those drawn from their parents might not help them cope with adversity or increase the odds of success, resources from schools (e.g., attending school and good school resources) would be very important for their academic success. Countries such as India and China where there is marked regional inequality in education system, government should strive to improve the quality of education system for disadvantaged groups. Additional support for families facing adversities to increase resources at home, provide assistance to enhance parenting skills and raise parents' and children's expectations and self-esteem is also critical.

In addition, these papers report some new information that is rarely mentioned in the western literature. For example, the disadvantaged Asian adolescents share different understandings of their stressful/challenging circumstances. Most Chinese left-behind children understand that their parents leave them to work in the cities out of love to give them a better future. Some Hong Kong students regarded adversities as normal events that everybody will meet. These findings suggest that these children are not merely passively exposed to experiential factors, rather, they play an active part in constructing their own life chances. Future research should explore how children/youth perceive risk factors they encounter and how these perceptions affect their coping abilities.

Results from this Special issue have implications for children, their families, schools and persons and institutions that work with children. Taken together, evidence suggests that efforts by educators to promote resilience should be tailored to the unique risks and the cultural context that a sub-population of children and youth experience (Ungar et al. 2014), and policy solutions also need to be sensitive to cultural context.

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