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## Beyond compulsory schooling: resilience and academic success of immigrant youth

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### Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between resilience and school completion of immigrant youth in Spain. Ninety-four students in their fourth year compulsory education participated in the study; they were from 19 different nationalities, between 15 and 18 years of age, and the ratio boys/girls was 55/45. There were no significant differences by gender, age, residence time, or incorporation into the education system. Differences were associated to cultural groups and variables related with academic self-perception. Finally, it was shown that young students that continue their studies beyond obligatory education have higher levels of resilience, as measured by the SV-RES scale. Overall, the findings in this study suggest the activation of the relational dimension of “social capital” in youth, as for example through mentoring or service-learning programs.

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*Keywords:* resilience; school success; immigrant youth; academic transition; high school

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### 1. Introduction

Research regarding the academic results of immigrant students from a disadvantaged background has shown there is great complexity in the teaching-learning process when this is carried out in a different language and is accompanied with cultural and social changes (Palou, 2011), with the consequent low-level academic performance and failure to adapt (Huguet and Navarro, 2006; Rodríguez and Luque, 2002). Despite educational disadvantage

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related to the fact of being an immigrant, some of these students achieve the mean of school success when compared with other students under similar circumstances (Pereda, 2006).

The following hypothesis has been developed here. Foreign students that overcome the risk transition period between Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) and Post-16 (Post-Compulsory Education), and are candidates to continue to higher education, have specific resilience characteristics that combine certain individual features and social-educational support. Explanations are trying to be found to why some youths succeed in school, while others in the same context, social community, or in unfavorable economical situations do not by focusing on the worldwide emerging perspective of “*resilience*”. Herein, resilience is understood as an “effective coping competence” in response to a risky or adverse situation (Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The study was carried out in public secondary schools with a high number of immigrant students located in Barcelona and provincial towns; two or more groups of students per level were included. From the four participating schools, three of them offer high school as a Post-16 educational option, and the fourth offers additionally mid-level vocational training.

Non-probability incidental sampling was used to choose participants, taking into account the disposition of the school to apply the instruments and the geographical diversity to ensure the highest representation. The sample included all foreign students from all cultural origins enrolled in the last year of Compulsory Secondary Education (2010-2011). Ninety four (94) children participated in the study, aged between 15 and 18; the ratio boys/girls was 55/45.

Participating students came from 19 different countries, implying diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. For subsequent analysis, their origin was classified according to the geographical regions specified in Table 1:

Table 1. Participants according to their origin

Origin	Nº of students	Percentage (%)	Valid percent (%)
Latin America	53	56.4	59.6
Asia (China)	7	7.4	7.9
Central Asia (Russia)	1	1.1	1.1
Southern Asia (Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh)	13	13.8	14.6
Non-EU state Romania	2	2.1	2.2
Maghreb	11	11.7	12.4
Rest of Africa	2	2.1	2.2
Doesn't know/Didn't answer	5	5.3	
Total	94	100	100

Regarding the number of years of residence in Catalonia, most of them had been living there between two and 10 years (79,7%); the number of students with less than 2 years of residence or more than 10 years is significantly lower (20,2%).

## 2.2. Measures

This study followed a transversal design combined with strategies to collect qualitative (semi-structured interview) and quantitative data (general questionnaire, resilience scale, school's scale, and life event scale). The results presented here correspond to the information collected with the following two instruments before the transition from ESO to Post-16 Education:

- *General questionnaire.* Instrument used to collect basic information regarding the participants: place of origin, time living in Spain, sense of belonging, educational level, profession of parents, identification and characterization of friends, support resources used by the centres, repeat a year, academic expectations, and self-evaluation of his/her academic situation.
- Resilience scale (Saavedra & Villalta, 2008). The SV-RES (Saavedra-Villalta-Resilience) scale evaluates 12 variables or factors which are defined by the crossing of two central questions or axis:
  - *Which personal resources, in a conscious or non-intended way, does the subject use when confronted with adversities?* These variables arise from Grotberg's interactive model (1995), which characterizes resilience taking into account three aspects of the relationship with others: the support the person believes he/she can receive (I have), the intrapsychic strength and internal conditions that he/she defines of himself/herself (I am), and the abilities to relate with others and solve problems (I can).
  - *What is a resilient behaviour according to the subject?* The second question deals with studying subjects with resilient trajectories (Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005). Saavedra (2003) has worked from this point of view with Latin American individuals, from where he developed the Emerging Model of Resilience. This model is a comprehensive synthesis of the resilient action from the point of view of the participants to learn and proactively transform their own judgements: baseline conditions, the view of self, view of the problem, and resilient response.

In this study, the scale was adapted in terms of language, characteristics of the sample, and aims of the research. The final questionnaire includes 61 scalar items, with each having four options to choose, from «strongly agree» to «disagree entirely». The results of the Cronbach's alpha test showed a high reliability of the scale (0.95). However, for the analysis of the results, an due to the correlations items-test, four items showing low homogeneity were eliminated: "I am a person with religious beliefs", "I am constantly thinking about what happens in my life", "I have a well-structured family", and "I can learn from my failures and my errors".

- *Academic persistence.* On the second phase of the research, the data obtained through the previously discussed instruments was compared with measurements of academic persistence. Registries of enrolment in the centres and regular school attendance were used for the Post-16 period. This allowed the characterization of student academic continuity.

## 3. Results

This study was addressed to understand and analyze how resilience is modeled in immigrant students from a disadvantaged background. Data analysis was conducted using the "R" statistical package, version 2.12.1, based on parametric and non-parametric tests, such as Student's t test, the Wilcoxon test, the Kruskal-Wallis test, and the Pearson Chi-Square test. It is important to note that no significant differences were found in the values of resilience in terms of schools, sex, age, period of residence, and year at which the student entered the school ladder system, among others variables measured with the General questionnaire. So there are no significant differences in terms of profiles in resilience of these youth according to these variables. Differences appeared specifically regarding cultural groups and certain variables associated with academic self-perception as detailed below. Results generated with the SV-RES scale confirmed the hypothesis that youth who persist beyond the compulsory period have a higher degree of resilience.

### 3.1. Resilience and origin

The size of some of the groups allowed only an initial exploration of the relationship between resilience and origin. Several tendencies were identified. Differences are mainly observed for Latin American youths, followed by Maghrebian, with considerably higher scores in comparison with those from Asia and southern Asia. The high scores obtained from Latin American participants are homogeneous within that group with little dispersion between scale variables. Contrarily, the scores obtained by Maghrebian students were not as homogeneous. For “Goals” and “Generativity”, the Maghrebian group clearly obtained higher scores in comparison with the rest of the groups.

The group of Asians obtained significantly lower scores. The scale was created in a Latin American environment (Saavedra & Villalta, 2008), and it might be assumed that this could cause some bias in the measurement of resilience. However, the lowest results for the Asian group were also observed for other variables measured in the study, such as the attitude they have towards education and their valuation of the centre. Furthermore, the higher rate of dropouts is seen for this group.

### 3.2. Resilience and academic perceptions

Student self-evaluation results regarding their academic level and their expectation towards passing or not the fourth and last course of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) are revealing.

The Kruskal-Wallis chi-squared test (12.1134,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.002342$ ) shows a difference ( $p = 0.031$ ) between the mean of the resilience and self-evaluation regarding their academic achievement. The students that think of themselves as having a high level, obtained significantly higher scores than those that see themselves as being behind and with lower educational development. A more specific analysis of the scale's variables, show that “Self-evaluation of Studies” correlates ( $p = 0.01$ ) with “Autonomy”, whose 5 items allude to the feeling of competence when dealing with a problem, good self-image, and autonomy when there is a need to act (Kotliarenco, 1996; Grotberg, 1995).

Regarding expectations of passing the course, a clear correlation exists between having higher scores in resilience and have confidence in completing satisfactorily the last year of the *ESO*.

### 3.3. Self-evaluation of studies and knowing immigrants that have completed Post-16 education

A significant correlation was obtained between self-evaluation of studies and the fact that the student know other immigrants that have completed their Post-16 education ( $p = 0.008$ ). Research participants that consider they are doing well or very well in their studies, seem to know more foreign people that have completed their Post-16 education; on the other hand, those that believe they are doing bad do not know or know few people that have finished Post-16 education.

### 3.4. Resilience and continuing with Post-16 education

We have confirmed our initial hypothesis regarding the follow-up of the participants during the transition between the ESO and Post-16 education (Kruskal-Wallis chi-square = 6.7123,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.03487$ ). Students with higher scores in the resilient scale have more probabilities to continue with their studies after having finished with compulsory education. From the 94 participants, 14 were dropouts, 17 repeated the last course of the ESO, and 54 continued with Post-16 education (either high school or mid-level vocational training). For nine participants such information was not available.

Table 2. Statistically significant differences in the SV-RES Scale Factors versus Academic Persistence

Grotberg's interactional competence (1995)	Consciousness structures (Saavedra and Villalta, 2008)			
	Baseline conditions	The view of self	View of the problem	Resilient response
I am	F1: Identity	F2: Autonomy	F3: Satisfaction	F4: Pragmatism
I have	F5: Ties	F6: Networks	F7: Models	F8: Goals
I can	F6: Affectivity	F10: Self-sufficiency	F11: Learning	F12: Generativity

p≤0.05

More specifically, a significant correlation has been found between the follow-up of the educational system and the variables “Autonomy” (F2) ( $p = 0.009$ ), “Links” (F5) ( $p = 0.036$ ), “Networks” (F6) ( $p = 0.017$ ), “Models” (F7) ( $p = 0.031$ ), and “Goals” (F8) ( $p = 0.003$ ). Dropout students show significantly lower scores in the resilience scale in comparison with those that continue with their study for whom the scores are higher.

#### 4. Discussion

This study explores the relationship between resilience and academic continuity in immigrant youths from a disadvantaged background. The most relevant results are summarized below.

First of all, a clear relation between the perception students have of school achievement and their resilience level has been shown. This result opens interesting lines for educational diagnosis and intervention. Teachers and related educational professionals should identify youths with low academic self-concept because is very likely that these students show a low level of resilience. As already seen, there is a close relationship between resilience and academic persistence.

“Future aspirations” (goals) is a key factor in educational transitions of immigrant boys and girls that have overcome the ESO/Post-16 education risk transition. However, having personal and/or professional scopes seems to be necessary although it is not sufficient for resilience. Future goals and aspirations should combine in a synergic and singular way with other factors to build a resilient process. For example, results suggest that the factors “ties,” “networks” and “models” from Grotberg's (1995) are essential for these youngsters to continue in the educational system. The ability to resist and face possible adverse situations associated with academic dropout could be mainly related with the resources the student has in his/her social environment, such as external support from family, role models, associations, or institutional services or social protection. The “personal networks” of immigrants express their level of social capital and relational vulnerability, and can be seen as an expression of the level of integration and an opportunity for social participation (Sandín and Pavón, 2011).

The equals can serve as models of schools success, these positive models can be schoolmates, friends, or acquaintances that are also immigrants and have completed Post-16 education, and have thus overcome the high-risk dropout period. Some studies and experiences have analyzed how “peer social capital” seems a protective factor against dropout and promotes academic engagement (Ream and Rumberger, 2008; Swenson, Nordstrom, and Hiester, 2008). Further studies should be carried out to analyze more deeply how these variables appear in immigrant students.

Understanding resilient processes in these students, prompts adopting an ecological approach (Ungar, 2008), deepen in the quality of the social environments surrounding the person beyond individual dispositions, recognizing that resilience develops through interactions between individual levels and favourable events in his/her environment that nourish their ability to confront certain situations.

This study has proved that the concept of resilience can be used as a diagnostic tool to stimulate successful trajectories. Studying cases of resilient students that exceed academic expectations will allow assessing individual, educational, familiar, and communal springs that could contribute towards a positive development in vulnerable

situations. Also, many questions have arisen with this project. Probably the main challenge associated with studying resilience is conceptual (Barton, 2005): “how to define resilience and consequently how to measure it?”

More studies should be developed on how resilience is modulated in different groups and contexts through multicultural projects. This would provide debate material on the desirability and feasibility of either universal or relative resilience indicators (Ungar and Liebenberg, 2011). Resilience probably develops in a singular way in every group or person. Further research should include a cross-cultural approach in the analysis on how they perceive, establish, and mobilize both, individual resources and the ones existing in their sites of interaction from a “cultural sensitivity” (Liebenberg and Ungar, 2009) and not only through measures that foresee similar results and processes for all youth in general.

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