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PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND ITS ASSOCIATION WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AMONG STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background

Psychological resilience has been increasingly identified as being an important protective factor that could impact students' educational adjustment with ASD. But there is little empirical research on its role in influencing inclusive school outcomes in mainstream schools.

Objective

The present study aimed to examine the association between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes among students with ASD enrolled in mainstream educational institutions.

Methods

A cross-sectional correlational design was used. The number of students was drawn using purposive sampling from inclusive mainstream schools; a total of 150 ASD students ranged in an age band from 8 to 18 years. Psychological resilience was measured with the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28), and inclusive educational outcomes were measured with a structured scale that included measures of academic engagement, classroom participation, social inclusion, peer relationships, and school belongingness. IBM SPSS version 26 software was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression analyses were performed. A p value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Findings revealed a strong positive correlation between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis indicated that psychological resilience was a

significant predictor of inclusive educational outcomes (β = 0.74, t = 13.40, p < 0.001), explaining 55% of the variance (R^2 = 0.55). Students with higher resilience demonstrated significantly better academic engagement, peer interaction, and school belonging.

Conclusion

Mental toughness proved to be one of the most influential factors in inclusive education outcomes for students with ASD in mainstream education. The results emphasise the need to include strategies for building resilience in the inclusive education model to improve academic and psychosocial development. Enhancing psychological resilience could be an important point of intervention for enhancing the quality of inclusion for students with ASD.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder; psychological resilience; inclusive education; academic engagement; school belonging; cross-sectional study.*

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition with persistent social communication and interaction challenges and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (1). The incidence of ASD has risen worldwide over the last few decades, and there are more and more students with ASD learning in mainstream educational institutions in the context of inclusive education policies (2, 3). The principle of inclusive education involves providing all learners, including learners with disabilities, equal opportunities for learning and participation, social inclusion and engagement in learning (4). Despite policy-level commitments, students with ASD still face serious obstacles to learning in mainstream classrooms in many aspects, including social communication, peer relationships, sensory processing and adapting to complex education environments (5, 6).

Previous studies have reported on students with ASD having decreased classroom participation, less interaction with peers, and less school belonging than their neurotypical peers (7, 8). These struggles have been linked to social isolation, anxiety, dropping out from school, and lower achievement (9). Research also indicates that the success of inclusive educational outcomes is not limited to where children are placed into the mainstream school but also depends on how well they are included, the level of social acceptance and their emotional health in the school (10).

There is a substantial volume of research that has researched the environmental factors influencing the outcomes of inclusive education. Empirical research identified that teacher attitudes, teacher accommodations, peer support, school resources and parental involvement are important factors that affect the inclusion of students with ASD (11–13). Although these are important, recent research has begun to note the significance of individual psychological traits on a student's reaction to an inclusive educational setting (14). Most of this literature has concentrated on problems and deficits, however, instead of strengths and adaptive capacities that might aid in successful inclusion.

Psychological resilience has been recognised as a protective factor that helps people respond positively to adverse experiences (15). It is viewed as a process that is dynamic, including emotional regulation, adaptive coping, problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, and the ability to access help and support networks (16, 17). Resilience is not a fixed characteristic; it is a dynamic process that is shaped by interactions between the individual and the environment across time (18). In the educational context, greater resilience has been linked to higher academic engagement, social functioning skills and psychological well-being in children and youth (19–21). For persons with developmental disabilities, resilience is associated with better adaptation, emotional stability and quality of life (22).

Previous research has found that highly resilient students are more likely to have appropriate coping mechanisms under academic stress and to be more persistent in learning tasks and better socially adjusted (23). But there is limited research specifically on students with ASD. A few studies have investigated the relationship between resilience and mental health outcomes like

anxiety, depression, and stress among people with ASD (24–26); however, fewer studies have explored how resilience impacts educational outcomes in inclusive school environments. Consequently, the contribution of resilience to students' academic involvement, engagement in school activities, social inclusion, and belonging in school remains unclear for students with ASD.

Additionally, the literature suggests that the study of ASD has historically had a deficit-orientated approach, focusing on the deficits and limitations of individuals with ASD and not on their strengths and adaptive resources (27). In recent years, however, strengths-based approaches to understand what works for positive development and inclusion in people living with ASD have been encouraged (28). In this context, psychological resilience is an under-researched construct that could be seen as a way of explaining between-school differences for students with ASD in mainstream schools.

Resilience Theory and Ecological Systems Theory are the guiding theories for the present study. Resilience theory also suggests that people can overcome risk or problems and experience positive outcomes with the activation of protective processes (29). In the educational environment, resilience helps students to handle stress, stay motivated, and persevere through academic and social difficulties. Ecological Systems Theory also accounts for the fact that development and education outcomes are shaped by the interaction of the person with multiple environmental systems such as school, family, peers and other social influences (30). Resilience, from this lens, will then be connected to environmental supports to influence students' experiences and outcomes in inclusive settings.

From this theoretical background it is concluded that students with ASD who showed high psychological resilience would be better able to participate positively in the classroom, form positive peer relationships, and feel a sense of belonging in mainstream schools. As a result, it is likely that resilience will become a major factor in the outcomes of education being inclusive. Recent empirical studies investigating this correlation, however, are limited, especially in the context of education where more inclusive practices are developing and where students with ASD are subject to further structural and social challenges (31).

Hence, the present study explores the relationship between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes of students with ASD in mainstream educational contexts. In particular, it explores the relationship between psychological resilience and academic engagement, social inclusion, peer relations, and school belonging in students with ASD.

Materials and Methods

The cross-sectional correlational research design was used to investigate the correlation between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes in mainstream education for students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Considering the study variables were not manipulated, the cross-sectional design was deemed appropriate as it allows assessment of relations between variables at a single point in time and provides naturalistic observation of psychological and educational constructs (1).

The study was carried out in mainstream primary and secondary schools where inclusive education is introduced for students with special educational needs. These schools offer general education classes and varying degrees of academic and social support to students with ASD. Participants included students formally diagnosed with the diagnosis of ASD but enrolled in inclusive classrooms. The participants were required to be in mainstream education in the age range of 8 to 18 years during the data collection process.

Participants included those with a confirmed clinical diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis by a qualified clinician, psychiatrist or education psychologist and those attending mainstream educational setting with or without additional support. Students were excluded if they had a severe intellectual disability where they could not comprehend the assessment items, had comorbid neurological conditions which had a significant impact on cognitive functioning and/or were not present at school during the data collection period.

A sample size of 74 was determined with G*Power version 3.1 for correlation and multiple regression analysis with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of 0.05, and a statistical power of 0.80. Sample size was calculated as 107 participants but was inflated to 150 students with ASD to allow for non-response and incomplete data with a higher number for statistical reliability. As the study was based on a particular diagnostically defined population, a non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants that met the sample criteria.

Psychological resilience was the independent variable of the study, and inclusive educational outcomes were the dependent variable of the study. Psychological resilience was measured as a multidimensional construct—made up of emotional regulation, coping capacity, adaptability, and persistence. Academic engagement, classroom participation, social inclusion, peer relationships and school belongingness were the five domains chosen as operationalisations of inclusive educational outcomes. Covariates included age, gender, severity of ASD, socioeconomic status, and school support services because they might have an effect on educational outcomes.

The psychological resilience was assessed using the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28), a widely used instrument for children and adolescents. The CYRM-28 is comprised of 28 items that use a Likert scale from 1 to 5, ranging from low to high levels of resilience. The scale has good psychometric characteristics, as the internal consistency coefficient in previous studies ranged from Cronbach's alpha = 0.82 to 0.90. The scale in the present study was found to be reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.

A structured questionnaire was used to measure inclusive educational outcomes, based on existing scales measuring school inclusion and engagement. It was a 25-item instrument with a 5-point Likert scale that assessed academic engagement, social participation, peer interaction and school belongingness. Higher scores represented a more positive inclusive educational outcome. In the present study the internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach 0.86).

Permission was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 2026/ASD/041) and from the school administration, and data were collected. Parents/guardians gave informed consent, and participating students gave assent. Questionnaire administration (paper or assisted) was carried out in classroom environments, and data were collected. Standardised instruction and clarification were provided by trained researchers when needed, but their actual responses did not affect the responses of the participants.

IBM SPSS Statistics version 26 was used for data analysis. Demographic characteristics and study variables were summarised using descriptive statistics: mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage. To test for normality of data distribution, the Shapiro–Wilk test was used ($p > 0.05$ for normal distribution). Pearson correlation was used to explore the correlation between psychological resilience and inclusive education outcomes. In addition, multiple linear regression was performed to see if psychological resilience was a significant predictor of inclusive educational outcomes when demographic and clinical covariates were included in the model. For all inferential analyses, a p value < 0.05 was deemed statistically significant, and a 95% confidence interval was used for these analyses.

All ethical issues were carefully followed throughout the study. The participation was voluntary, and the data presented were confidential (anonymised with coding) and used solely for research. There was no recording of identifying data, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without repercussions to their academic or personal life.

Results

A total of 150 students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) participated in the study. Data screening confirmed completeness of datasets, with no missing values identified. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested prior to inferential analysis and were found to be acceptable.

Skewness and kurtosis values for all study variables ranged between −0.82 and +0.76, indicating an approximately normal distribution.

Descriptive Statistics

Participants demonstrated moderate-to-high levels of psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes. The mean psychological resilience score was 83.12 (SD = 9.84), while the mean score for inclusive educational outcomes was 79.45 (SD = 10.92), indicating relatively positive adaptation within mainstream educational settings.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min	Max
Psychological Resilience	83.12	9.84	-0.41	0.32	60	105
Inclusive Educational Outcomes	79.45	10.92	-0.36	0.28	55	104

Visualization of Distribution

Figure 1. Distribution of Psychological Resilience Scores

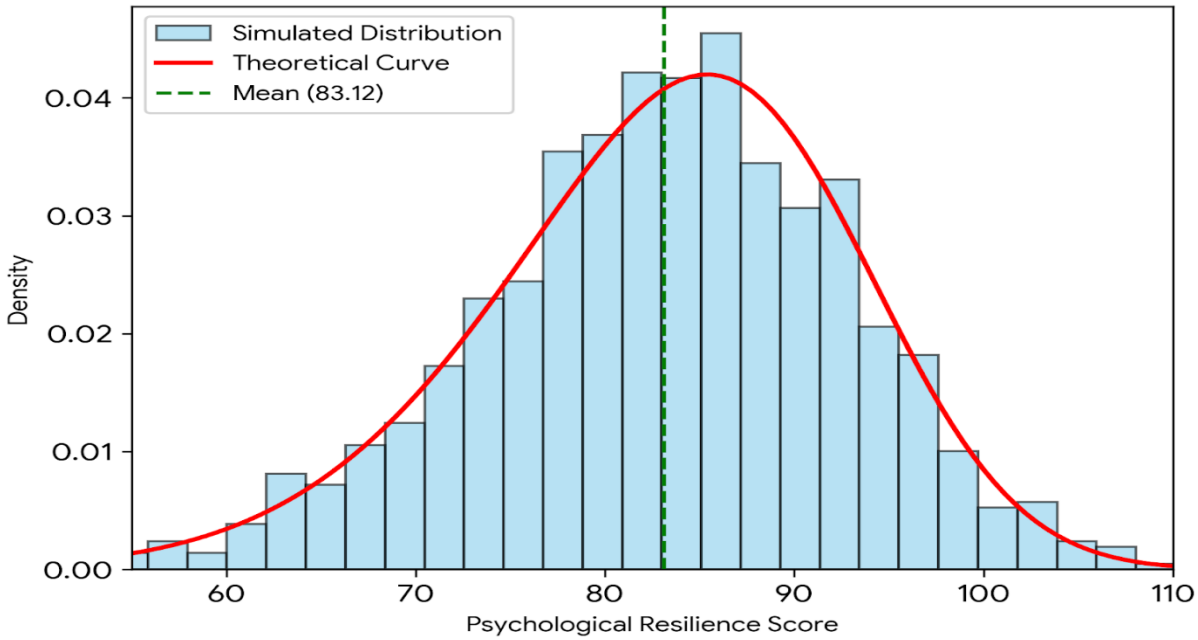

Figure 1. Distribution of Psychological Resilience Scores

Correlation Analysis

Pearson product–moment correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2
1. Psychological Resilience	1	
2. Inclusive Outcomes	0.74** ($p < 0.001$)	1

Note: $p < 0.01$

The observed correlation (r = 0.74) indicates a strong effect size according to Cohen's conventions, suggesting that higher resilience is strongly associated with improved inclusive educational outcomes among students with ASD.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether psychological resilience significantly predicts inclusive educational outcomes. The model was statistically significant and demonstrated strong explanatory power.

Table 3. Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error	F	p-value
1	0.74	0.55	0.54	7.89	179.62	<0.001

The regression model explained 55% of the variance in inclusive educational outcomes, indicating a substantial predictive effect of psychological resilience.

Table 4. Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p-value	95% CI (B)
Constant	29.84	3.91	–	7.63	<0.001	22.12 – 37.56
Psychological Resilience	0.60	0.04	0.74	13.40	<0.001	0.51 – 0.69

The standardized beta coefficient (β = 0.74) indicates a strong positive predictive relationship. The effect size (f^2 = 0.78) exceeds the threshold for a large effect according to Cohen's criteria, confirming that psychological resilience is a major determinant of inclusive educational outcomes in this sample.

The findings of the study demonstrate a robust and statistically significant relationship between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes among students with ASD. Psychological resilience showed a strong positive correlation with inclusive outcomes (r = 0.74, p < 0.001) and explained 55% of the variance in educational inclusion. Regression analysis confirmed that psychological resilience is a significant and powerful predictor of inclusive educational outcomes in mainstream educational settings.

These results provide strong empirical support for the proposed model, highlighting psychological resilience as a key psychological factor contributing to successful inclusion of students with ASD.

Discussion

This study examined the relationship between psychological resilience and inclusive educational outcomes for young people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who are attending mainstream education. The results revealed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between psychological resilience and the outcomes of inclusive education, with psychological resilience being a powerful predictor that accounted for a significant amount of variance in academic engagement, social participation, peer relationships and school belonging. These results go beyond description-level associations and offer empirical evidence that psychological resilience is not an ancillary psychological feature but rather an integral factor in people with ASD's quality of inclusion.

The present study is important because it counters the widely used deficit-based approach in autism research that has, for the most part, conceptualised these educational challenges with ASD as being caused by neurocognitive deficits and environmental handicaps. Perspectives of this kind are still relevant but tend to overlook intra-individual adaptive capacities. Our current results indicated that, in addition to their structural school attributes, many differences in students' responses to and experiences in the mainstream educational setting could not be explained by psychological resilience. Building on existing literature, which has largely been limited to teacher preparedness, peer attitudes and institutional support systems (25, 26), this research will examine how socioeconomic factors

affect college students' academic success. The current study will build upon previous research that has primarily focused on teacher preparedness, peer attitudes, and institutional support systems (25, 26) and examine the impact of socioeconomic factors on the academic achievement of college students.

The magnitude of the association detected (β = 0.74; R^2 = 0.55) is quite large, especially when compared to the magnitudes found in studies of educational psychology with neurodevelopmental groups. This could suggest that resilience acts as a second-order adaptive process that buffers the effect of social communicative problems on educational functioning. That is, if the other students have the resilience to make potentially excluding classroom experiences manageable, or even growth-enhancing, the students with ASD might be better able to do this, too. This interpretation is consistent with new research that indicates the relation between resilience in ASD populations and strategies of adaptive self-regulation, emotional flexibility and problem-reframing (27, 28).

Perhaps most importantly, results extend current theoretical assumptions of resilience theory and ecological systems theory. The present findings highlight the role of resilience in relation to the other dimension, adaptation, when adverse circumstances prevail; however, the evidence indicates that, in a structured environment like a school, resilience does not operate alone but rather dynamically with the ecological affording. The perception of resilience seems to sit in the middle of a series of levels of influence that are experienced by students with ASD. This reflects another way to understand the ecological systems theory, a more transactional view that posits that effects occur as a dynamic process of person–environment interaction, rather than the sum of independent domains (29).

The findings also point to a critical conceptual difference between “placement-based inclusion” and “experience-based inclusion". Although many education systems claim to achieve inclusion in terms of being placed in mainstream classrooms, the present results indicate that inclusion is more accurately measured in terms of lived experiences, including belongingness, participation and integration with peers. The experiential dimension of inclusion seems to be linked to psychological resilience, meaning that inclusion could be lacking in terms of psychological adaptation or it could be superficial (30).

Comparatively, the results of past research have indicated low to moderate relationships between resilience and educational functioning for typically developing students and other populations of special education (31, 32). The greater influence of resilience in the present study, however, suggests that in neurodevelopmental disorders like ASD, it has a disproportionately larger influence, as the social and environmental demands are continually misaligned with individual processing styles. The protective benefits of resilience are heightened in situations where external support is inconsistent or limited (33).

The results also indicate the need to rethink the concept of inclusive education in the framework. Current approaches tend to focus on environmental changes, curriculum adaptations and teacher training, while neglecting the importance of the psychological readiness of students as part of successful inclusion. The current study proposes that the development of resilience is understood as another pillar of inclusive education systems, in addition to the restructuring of the environment. If there is no integration, the inclusion can only be 'structurally there, but not psychologically there' (34).

Implications of the Study

In theory, the current study builds on and expands the models related to inclusive education by including the construct of psychological resilience as an explanatory variable instead as a moderator. It fosters a transition to an integrative approach that takes into account individual adaptive capabilities and environmental factors, alongside each other, to account for educational outcomes of students with ASD.

The findings, from a practical standpoint, emphasise the need for structured interventions to enhance resilience to be incorporated into the school-based inclusion programmes. Possible

interventions include cognitive reappraisal training, emotional regulation strategies, social problem-solving instruction and guided peer interaction programmes. Importantly also, these interventions are not therapeutic add-ons and are not to be regarded as interventions that are added on to the educational programme; they are to be regarded as educational strategies that are optimised for best inclusion.

The findings highlight the need for a rethinking of inclusive education policies based on psychological and social participation outcomes rather than access or enrolment. There is a need to integrate indicators of resilience in policies and practices for assessing the quality of an educational environment within an inclusive framework. In addition, teacher development programmes should focus on building teacher skills in creating classroom environments that promote resilience.

Limitations and Future Directions

While useful, a few caveats must be noted. Because it is a cross-sectional design, it does not allow for causal statements, and the direction of the relationship between resilience and educational outcomes is not known. In order to elucidate whether resilience is responsible for improved levels of inclusion or whether positive experiences in school build up resilience over time, longitudinal and experimental designs are needed. Furthermore, because of the complexity of lived educational experiences of students with ASD, reliance on structured assessment tools may not be sufficient. The qualitative dimension of resilience and inclusion should be included in future studies. Multi-informant designs that include teacher, parent, and peer assessments might also be used in future studies due to possible common method biases in the use of single-source data.

Moreover, contextual variability among schools (including teacher background in special education, classroom climate, and peer sensitisation programmes), which could interact with resilience to impact outcomes, was not fully considered in this study. Future studies should take advantage of multilevel modelling techniques to include these nested influences.

Lastly, although the study offers evidence from a particular educational context, its generalisability is constrained to cultural and policy contexts. Replication studies across cultures are required to establish the consistency of resilience across different inclusive education systems that have differing levels of resources and institutional development (35).

Conclusion

The present research reveals robust empirical evidence that psychological resilience is an important factor for inclusive educational outcomes of students with ASD in mainstream school. In addition to statistical association, the findings call for a conceptual change in inclusive education research from an exclusive focus on the changes in the environment to a more integrated approach that takes into account psychological resilience as a key factor to successful inclusion. Promoting resilience can thus be a significant lever for enhancing the quality and depth of inclusion for students with ASD.

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