

# Educational Resilience: A Study of Students belonging to the Economically Weaker Section

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## **Abstract**

Indian educational scene has undergone many transformations in recent times. Government of India by a Constitutional Act in 2002, (86th Amendment Act) added a new Article 21A and the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) provides a platform to reach out with specific provisions for disadvantaged groups, such as child labourers, migrant children, children with special needs. As educational coverage rates have been increasing, greater proportions of socially disadvantaged students and those who were previously excluded, have been brought into the education system. However, while this has promoted access to education on the one hand, it has also generated significant challenges for 'equity' and 'quality' of education, on the other. Twenty-five percent reservation policy had provided opportunity for the children to step inside the private unaided school, but as they enter, with different cultural, social and academic capital, they face different challenges in the school. It is important to point out at this juncture that students belonging to the economically weaker sections live and study in different contexts, and therefore have different educational needs as compared to their socially advantaged peers. Further, while it is well documented that these students tend to perform relatively poorly at school, several studies have shown that in most countries there is a group of students who are academically successful despite their challenging backgrounds. Their struggle to 'bounce back' in educational achievements despite adversity will provide an in-depth understanding of the situation and provide methods to meet these challenges in the educational settings. The present research explores factors that build up educational resilience among students belonging to the economically weaker sections. Their educational resilience is observed in the school and also know their personal experiences, stories, and factors drawn from other sources which they feel have contributed to their development, success and making them educationally resilient.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Educational Resilience, Economically Weaker Section (EWS), adolescents

## **Introduction**

The rapid development in the science and technology had affected the different spheres of the person's life. Directly as well as indirectly the physical and mental health of the person is drastically affected by the present changing scenario. Previously, the research and service delivery were deficits-based (approach) which focused on factors related to psychopathology and maladaptive functioning. But in recent years it has

shifted its focus from what is clinically wrong, to the promotion of well-being and the creation of a satisfying life - one that is filled with meaning, pleasure, engagement, positive relationships and accomplishment. This shift in emphasis is visible in contemporary research and theorization in Positive Psychology, Education for Mental Health and Social Inclusion.

Social inclusion, the buzz word in Indian context is of importance. Considering the age old concept of



caste system, many people are still suffering from inhuman attitudes and atrocities. Inequality in India has been the topic of concern since Independence. In India, with the rapid industrialization, the economic inequality has also emerged apart from caste inequality. This debate has been categorized into vertical inequalities and horizontal inequalities. In the present paper I have explored the vertical inequality that is based on the income and its relation with the educational outcomes. Historically, the occupation and caste were interrelated but with recent developments the disparities have been more in the class context. Considering the Article 21A and the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009), the government had presented its concern for the children who are deprived of education for their proper development. This Act, had provided a platform for specific provisions for disadvantaged groups, such as child laborers, migrant children, children with special needs, or those who have a disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economic, geographical, linguistic, gender or such other factors. Another landmark in this direction was upholding the constitutional validity of the RTE Act (2009) by the Supreme Court in April 2012, giving a minimum of 25% of seats for children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups (EWS) in all private unaided primary schools. In particular, Section 12 (1) (c) of the RTE Act stipulates that the 25% reservation be implemented while admitting students to Class 1 (Tucker & Sahgal, 2012, p. 2).

It is important to point out at this juncture that students belonging to the Economically Weaker Sections live and study in different contexts. Many of them living in poverty amidst the deplorable living conditions have many social barriers. Their social, cultural, and academic capital are different from their peers. They suffer from barriers pertaining to language as even their local language doesn't conform and is different from the language used by their peers in the school. So, their peers who have “codes” (Bernstein, year) and “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, year) certainly have benefit over the students from EWS. Therefore, educational needs of students coming from EWS category are different as compared to their more

socially advantaged peers. In India, particularly, the beliefs of teachers and principals also affect the development of the children coming from the EWS. They believe that - these children do not possess the right environment at home or 'home status' to enable them to perform well in school and so they are weak in studies and continue to remain thus. (“*weak hain toh weak hi rehte hain*”) (Singh, 2011, p.33).

Further, while it is well documented that these students tend to perform relatively poorly at school, several studies have shown that in most countries there is a group of students who are academically successful despite their challenging backgrounds (OECD, 2011; Borman & Overman, 2004; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Such students are said to be resilient.

### Understanding Resilience

Resilience refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks (Garnezy, Masten & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten & Powell, 2003; Rutter, 1985). A key requirement of resilience is the presence of both risks and promotive factors that either help bring about a positive outcome or reduce or avoid a negative outcome.

In the present study, I explore how resilience builds up; what it really means in the lives of students; how it manifests in schools, especially in students from the economically weaker sections. Accordingly, the central focus of the present study is on exploring the phenomenon of educational resilience in students from the economically weaker sections, particularly in terms of how it builds up and identifying the factors that influence its development.

### Understanding Educational Resilience

Educational resilience is defined as — “the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences.” (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997, p. 4). Educational resilience can be thought of as a continuous interaction between an individual and



the adverse characteristics of his or her environment. The term educational resilience as defined by Wang and her colleagues (1994), was found to be very comprehensive and appropriate for the present study.

### **Economically Weaker Section**

According to the Right to Education Act (2009), Section 2, Clause (e) spells out that the child belonging to the 'weaker section' refers to "a child belonging to such parent or guardian whose annual income is lower than the minimum limit specified by the appropriate Government, by notification." The present study complies with this definition.

### **The present study**

There are very few researches that focus on EWS students and their successes. Their struggle to achieve educational success can play a very important role in enhancing our understanding about the factors and conditions that could make a positive difference to the lives of children belonging to marginalized and socially disadvantaged groups and communities. Understanding the processes involved in the development of educational resilience could provide the basis for the design of policies aimed at breaking the intergenerational cycle of poor academic achievement, poor job prospects and poverty.

### **Design of the Study**

The design of the study is largely descriptive in nature with a distinct qualitative thrust as well. It was planned in two phases. Phase I was conceptualized as the Macro-Phase and Phase-II as the Micro-Phase. The focus of Phase I was to understand the nature and form of representation of the behavioral patterns of students who show educational resilience as they unfold and manifest in their personality and different aspects of school life. In Phase I, socio-demographic questionnaire, non-participant observation schedule and teacher's checklist were used for identification of students showing educational resilience. Phase II aimed to know the personal experiences, anecdotes, aspirations, ways of dealing with difficulties and any other significant factors, which students, who

were identified as being resilient from Phase I, mentioned as having contributed to the development of resilience in them. Interview schedules for students, parents, teachers and significant support providers, semi-projective tasks and academic record were used as tools in the Phase II.

### **Description of the School**

The site of the study was the Sri Sathya Sai Higher Secondary School situated in Piplani, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Bhopal. The school, previously run by Ladies Club BHEL, Bhopal, was started in the form of a *Balwadi* in the year 1969. In 1972, it was adopted by the Sri Sathya Sai Organization. Presently, it follows the Madhya Pradesh State Board Examination. Due to the belief of the founder of the school in single gender education, the sections for boys and girls are separate. At present, there are 810 students and 35 teachers in the school. Of these, 80% belong to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe category. This school was chosen for the study since its percentage of students coming from the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) is very high. More than 75% of the students come from the Piplani, BHEL slum area. The school believes in enrolling students from the nearby areas which in this case are the Piplani slums.

### **Participants**

The sample of participants for Phase I of the study was drawn from the morning shift of the school. Students from classes VIII-XI of both the boys' and girls' sections were observed. (Total no. of students -240). In Phase-II of the study, fourteen students were identified from the results of Phase I.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection was done in two phases: Phase-I included non-participant observations and administration of the socio-demographic questionnaire to the participants. For a period of three to five days, the researcher performed non-participant observation in each section and each class. Each interview was conducted individually. The interview was conducted in a way that allowed student participants to broadly describe their own



perceptions of how home, school and peer group contributed to their academic success, despite the challenges and adversities that they faced.

### Findings

The findings are divided into Phase I and Phase II. In Phase I the findings are discussed under subthemes that had emerged in due course of the analysis.

In Phase I of the study, all students of the classes studied had a few students from the economically weaker section who were identified as having some of the attitudinal and behavioural characteristics that typify educational resilience. These included high levels of motivation, clarity of goals, task commitment, dealing with adversity realistically, achievement orientation, internal locus of control, valuing education as a means of mobility, and a hard working attitude.

The forms and degrees of challenge and risk emanating from family factors and economic constraints varied across the participants, each one of them was seen to have dealt with them with courage and determination. Some of them made personal adjustments, others accepted the difficulties and factored them into their everyday lives, some kept their motivation high which sustained them and a few others worked very hard to accommodate all the demands and pressures.

A common feature observed across candidates was that they all had big dreams for the future. They aspired to get well-paid jobs, fulfill their dreams and wanted to assume middle class professions so that they could elevate their family status and make their parents proud.

Findings of Phase II are discussed below in the form of themes:

### Nature and Form of Educational Resilience

There was a sharp sense of judgment of the challenging life situations in all these students and they had a willingness to tackle these situations realistically without blaming it on their families. Their problem-solving and decision-making skills were quite developed. They all seemed to have a never-give-up attitude, which was appreciated by their families and teachers.

High educational aspirations and goals were shown by almost all the students. This has been identified as a factor in educational resilience in earlier researches (Turner, Laria, Shapiro, & Perez, 1993; Waxman, Huang and Padron, 1997; Alva, 1991; Alva and Padilla, 1995).

While the need for achievement was very high in students selected for level II, but, almost all the other participants too showed achievement needs in both scholastic and non-scholastic areas. The work of Werner and Smith (1992); Hestyanti (2006) and Bernard (1997) in the past has also focused on the relationship between achievement and life challenges.

### Lived Experience of the participants

The family experiences of many of the participants drew their attention towards the need for social justice and protection of the rights of those who were socially disadvantaged. While all of them felt strongly about this, some of them were more vociferous about it. Their need for social justice and mobility also found articulation in their career orientations.

Positive expectations for the future from parents, especially, from the mother, and the girls students' themselves in terms of the identity that they wished to build were seen as factors accounting for the development of educational resilience, confirming previous findings of the study by Benner and Mistry (2007).

### Experiences related to School and Classroom Environment

Resilient students, even though they encounter difficult life circumstances or traumatic events are seen to overcome the adverse impact of these. The environment of the school and the classroom are known to be important aspects, which influence students' learning, academic performance and motivation. Thus, educational resilience may be seen as the power to withstand challenges in the classroom and thrive despite it. Usually, those who consider school as a safe place enjoy educational challenges and do not experience problems with others at school. Hence, they may attain significant levels of educational achievement in schools





and be considered educationally resilient. The motivational climate in the class and encouragement by the teachers was well documented in the interviews of students.

### Teacher Support

Teachers were identified as positive forces in the development of educational resilience. Most participants shared that in the school, teachers were the only persons who could provide them positive support and become role models for them. They also felt that coming from a lower socio-economic background, they were in the most critical need of support providers who could help them to feel safe and protected. In most cases, these persons were their teachers. What also emerged was that the teaching approach of the school encouraged students to explore their own beliefs, attitudes, and values. Thus the focus was not only on studies but also on self-development.

### Role of Significant Persons in the Development of Educational Resilience

In the present study, the role of the significant person on the life of the participants has not only found to be deep; it has led to the development of educational resilience in many of them. These social support providers were the significant persons in their life who instilled in them both directly as well as indirectly, the passion for getting good marks and aspiring for good jobs.

### School Policies, Practices, Beliefs and Educational Resilience

The educational policy followed by Sri Sathya Sai School entails a life-long process of transformation, and aims to strengthen the sacred connections between the individual, the family, the society, and all living beings.

Most of the participants as well as teachers identified the school's practices and beliefs as being most helpful and instrumental their having developed resilience. According to the teachers and school management, it has been the policy of the school since its inception to work for bringing the children residing in the nearby slum areas to the school as a service to society. From 1972 onwards, the school has been enrolling children belonging to

the lower socio-economic strata, much before the RTE Act (2009) was passed. Many of the parents and teachers believed that this initiative of the school was the most important factor enabling students to reach the school.

### Contributions of the Study

The present study highlights the role played by the community, family, and school in the development of educational resilience among the students belonging to EWS category. A significant contribution of the study has been to focus on the lived experiences of participants and to know how they contribute to the development of resilience. The study has also highlighted and drawn attention to the trials and tribulations that children and adolescents face on account of the societal norms that prevail within the lower socioeconomic strata.

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