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Links Between Disadvantage and Educational Achievement in a Low-income Urban Setting in Bangalore, India

Arshia CHATTERJEE¹, Stephanie BURNS²

¹Queen's University Belfast, School of Psychology, Northern Ireland, UK 0000-0003-0656-9217

²Queen's University Belfast, School of Psychology, Northern Ireland, UK 0000-0001-7482-7316

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the experiences that contributed to the academic achievement of students in disadvantaged settings in India. In India, young people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are at higher risk of underachievement and dropping out of school. However, some of them achieve highly despite their adverse circumstances and experience. Through interviews with 12 high achievers and their school principal, this study explored the perceived factors that contributed to their academic achievement. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, and findings indicate a combination of protective factors at different levels – individual, family, school, and community – that contribute to resilience and achievement. The supportive relationships that these adolescents have at the different levels contribute to their achievement directly and indirectly. The findings are discussed in relation to theory with future considerations for Indian-centred research that can inform interventions in disadvantaged and low-income urban communities.

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Disadvantage, academic achievement, adverse childhood experiences, resilience

1. Introduction

The 2016 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey reported that although most children from rural areas and urban slums in India are enrolled in school, only 46.7% of all assessed eighth-graders could read simple English sentences and only 43.3% could do the expected level of arithmetic (ASER, 2016). Literacy and math levels have been declining and dropout rates in secondary (high) schools, especially for girls, remains high. In India, the level and quality of education individuals receive can be based significantly on their income and socioeconomic status. There is great inequity in attainment and achievement levels for students from different socioeconomic levels, and dropout and academic failure rates for disadvantaged students is high (Tilak, 2002). The educational inequity in India includes (but is not limited to) differences between rural and urban areas, private and government schools, and gender differences.

As in several countries, poverty in India is inversely related to the level of education attained (Tilak, 2007). In disadvantaged communities, there are generally lower levels of achievement, high rates of dropout, and in extreme cases, total exclusion from education (Tilak, 2002). To lessen inequity, the government has attempted to implement policies like the Right to Education Act to give disadvantaged students free education and access to schools (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Large organizations are also obligated to contribute funds for Corporate Social Responsibility and some prominent organizations have identified education as an area to focus on. They contribute through giving financial aid and technology to schools, and other educational initiatives (Sharma & Kiran, 2012). Therefore, there is substantial funding channelled into trying to ensure that disadvantaged students can have more equal footing, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work alongside schools

¹ Corresponding author's address: Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK
e-mail: achatterjee01@qub.ac.uk

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and the government to impact young people from disadvantaged areas (Batley & Rose, 2010). Despite considerable funding being directed towards educational initiatives in India, qualitative research in the area remains limited.

Despite the gaping inequality in educational opportunities and achievement in India, many students from low-income and disadvantaged areas achieve, graduate, and pursue higher education every year. While the income gap is constantly widening, many disadvantaged students succeed in national examinations and study at the same level as more privileged students in university. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, this study sought to explore the multiple environmental levels at which young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are influenced in terms of their schooling, with the aim of illuminating the factors that may lead to achievement in spite of economic disadvantage. This may, in turn, inform interventions and social initiatives that work to promote achievement in similar communities.

Neighbourhood Disadvantage and its Relationship to Educational Outcomes

Children's development is shaped by both their biological and individual traits and the environment they are exposed to, according to Bronfenbrenner and Morris' Bio-Ecological Model of Development (2007). This environment includes family dynamics, peer groups, schools, and neighbourhood characteristics of where they live. Additionally, Pluess (2015) argues that there are multiple individual differences and determinants of environmental sensitivity. These theoretical perspectives therefore provide a useful framework for exploring and understanding the ways in which neighbourhood disadvantage influences child and adolescent development in relation to educational outcomes.

There are many studies in Western contexts that link disadvantage and educational achievement. Socioeconomic status, disadvantage and poverty are risk factors linked to educational outcomes, and early adversity can have long-term cognitive effects that extend into adolescence and middle age (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; Richards & Wadsworth, 2004). Living in disadvantaged communities increases the risk of young people being exposed to factors outside the family that affect their development (Campbell et al., 2000). Deprived neighbourhoods are linked to higher crime rates for several reasons and at-risk students are more likely to struggle in school and drop out before graduating (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Peterson et al., 2000).

Studies suggest that children growing up in violent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods are likely to fall behind their peers from less disadvantaged neighbourhoods. While some of these effects seem small, they are significant and long lasting, and continue to affect learning skills and gaps in adolescence (Burdick-Will, 2016). A positive atmosphere in school is not always enough for academic success; even when schools attempt to create positive change, they can turn into places where "transmission of problem behaviors" from neighbourhoods occurs (Browning & Burrington, 2006). Similarly, neighbourhood instability can lead to lower adult efficacy in communities to regulate youths' antisocial or destructive behavior, gang activity, and truancy, which may lead to academic failure and early dropout, and neighbourhoods comprised of adults who are unemployed or have low-paying jobs provides children less exposure to financially secure adults, leading to a lack of understanding about the importance of achievement and higher likelihood of dropping out of school (Hicks et al., 2017).

The recency of exposure to neighbourhood deprivation matters too – children exposed to neighbourhood disadvantage more recently score significantly lower on tests than children who experienced disadvantage in the past (Hicks et al., 2017). Neighbourhood characteristics may also shape educational aspirations; adolescents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have lowered college aspirations (Stewart et al., 2007). There is evidence from American neighbourhoods that being exposed to disadvantage for longer periods reduced the probability of high school graduation for black adolescents from 96% to 76%, and for non-black adolescents from 95% to 87% (Wodtke et al., 2011). This body of empirical evidence supports the claim that neighbourhood factors influence educational outcomes of young people.

Beating the Odds of Neighbourhood Disadvantage

While poverty and disadvantage impact outcomes, there is evidence globally that students who experience adversity and deprivation are often able to "beat the odds" and do well (OECD, 2019). Studies suggest that family support, personality traits such as high self-efficacy, and teacher support are mediating factors for high achievement in disadvantaged students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Floyd, 1996).

Resilience is a key concept in relation to achievement, along with family and school support. Garmezy's (1991) models of resilience explain how protective factors, which can be individual, familial, or other support structures in a child's life, compensate for adversity. Another definition explains resilience as the way in which individuals adapt and achieve positive outcomes despite risk factors and adversity (Masten, 2013). Both definitions highlight the importance of protective factors that help diminish the negative effects of adversity.

Individual characteristics such as self-awareness, internal locus of control, and goal-orientation can help young people from disadvantaged settings succeed in school and overcome disadvantages linked to adversities (Still, 2013). High school students in a low-income neighbourhood who reported higher levels of locus of control are also more likely to have higher educational aspirations (Flowers et al., 2003). At the family level, findings indicate that parental involvement in adolescents' academics is associated with fewer behavioral problems in school and higher academic aspirations (Hill et al., 2004). Research suggests that it is beneficial for parents to be involved and reach out to teachers actively to compensate for disadvantage (Yan, 2000). Parental involvement and monitoring are linked to achievement for adolescents, and protective factors in parenting include warmth, responsiveness, and consistent discipline (Masten & Reed, 2002; Spera, 2005). Having positive relationships with parents can promote children's wellbeing by influencing self-esteem and motivation levels (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009).

Beyond family, school can play an important role in protecting disadvantaged youth and promoting resilience. School can allow these students to be free of adversity for periods of time, and participating in extra-curricular activities can give them a sense of belonging (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Novotný, 2011). Teachers also play a vital role in student achievement. In qualitative research, students often credit positive and trusting relationships with teachers for their success. For instance, studies among successful elementary and high-school students found that most of them gave credit for their achievement to their teachers (Jeffrey et al., 2013; Land et al., 2014).

There is some evidence that having a source of support in the wider community may influence young peoples' academic achievement as well. While neighbourhood disadvantage is a risk factor, Witherspoon et al. (2016) found that having a strong connection in the neighbourhood can give young people affirmation and help them set goals and aspirations.

Rationale for Current Research

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of high-achieving young people living in highly disadvantaged areas to help identify why they have obtained positive educational outcomes, beating the trend of the inverse relationship between disadvantage and achievement. Most existing research has been conducted with communities in the USA, UK, and Canada. In India there has been nation-wide research, but it has been focused on implications of large-scale policies in education and economics, or limited to a rural context, although many organizations working with youth operate in urban areas. Most previous research in India has also been of quantitative nature, looking at relationships between poverty and school enrolment or educational outcomes (Filmer & Pritchett, 2001; Tilak, 2018). Notwithstanding the amount of funding that goes into the social sector in India, there is a lack of understanding as to why some children from low-income communities overcome adversity and achieve highly compared to others with similar backgrounds of adversity. Using one-on-one interviews with young people and the principal of one case-study school in urban Bangalore, India, the goal of this study was to gather accounts of their lived experience of 'achieving against the odds'. In doing so, it would be possible to answer the research question: what forms of support and personal experiences may explain why these students were able to do well despite living in circumstances similar to those of their peers who do not achieve as highly? Such in-depth qualitative research may help inform practices adopted by NGOs and organizations that are involved in supporting the education and wellbeing of young people from similar contexts.

2. Methodology

Due to the lead researcher's cultural knowledge of the area, a school in a low-income urban setting in Bangalore with high levels of multiple disadvantage (including unemployment, high dropout rates in secondary school, and issues of community conflict) was chosen as an instrumental case-study school to obtain in-depth, phenomenological insights. The young people who attended this school all came from the

surrounding community and similar backgrounds in terms of income and socioeconomic disadvantage. Because of these characteristics, and the fact that the school produces alumni who “defy the odds” to become high achievers, it was a good fit for this study.

2.1. Research Group

Young people who attended the school at the time of data collection in February 2020, or those who recently graduated from it, were invited to be interviewed based on their high academic achievement. Purposive sampling was used within the case study school, and the principal, after being interviewed herself, acted as a gatekeeper to help identify students aged 16 and above whose arithmetic and literacy scores put them in the top 10% of their year group. The principal sent an invitation letter to them on the researcher’s behalf, after which they were asked to communicate directly with the researcher about whether they wanted to participate. The interviews took place in an adjoining building to the school in order to maintain confidentiality. Twelve interviews were conducted, with six male and six female students, to maintain a gender balance.

Table 1. *Demographics of Participating Students*

Student Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Aditya	Male	20
Anushka	Female	18
Chithra	Female	17
Hiren	Male	19
Jaya	Female	19
Mira	Female	16
Nikitha	Female	17
Pavan	Male	19
Priya	Female	18
Sachin	Male	16
Shri	Male	18
Uday	Male	16

2.2. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

An initial interview was conducted with the principal about the general social context of the school and factors that she believed helped young people succeed. This helped gather information, in addition to students’ perspectives, on the school context and policies that promoted young people’s engagement, resilience and other factors that may have helped them achieve.

All interviews were conducted in English and questions to students were aimed at understanding individual factors (e.g., ‘What motivates you to do well?’), social factors (e.g., ‘Who are the people in your life who have an effect on how you do in school?’), and school-level factors (e.g., ‘Can you tell me about your early experiences of school?’) that may explain why these students succeeded despite neighbourhood disadvantage.

2.3. Data Analysis

The interviews, upon completion, were transcribed verbatim using audio recordings. After multiple readings of the transcripts, coding was done by making exploratory comments in a column and then drawing out themes from the notes made, as described by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012). The lead author of this paper looked at the transcripts and reviewed the codes, under the supervision of the second author, for researcher triangulation and to enhance validity of the findings (Leung, 2015; Patton, 1999). A consistent approach was taken to coding and focusing on both the unique characteristics of participants as well as the patterns of meaning across participants. Each individual transcript was coded and emerging themes were noted one at a time before the superordinate themes were identified. Given the phenomenological focus of the research question, the data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to meaningfully understand students’ experience. Themes were studied, and findings were compared to those from Western contexts to check for similarities and differences across cultures.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Consent to record the interviews and use the information was taken from participants both verbally and on consent sheets. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and all names were changed in the transcripts to

protect their anonymity. In the case that the interview triggered negative reactions, the student would be connected to a visiting counsellor with their consent.

3. Findings

Five main themes were identified in the interviews which were common across participants.

Sources of Community Support

Most participants reported having supportive relationships in the community. They were familiar with neighbours and other residents who they could rely on in different ways. For instance, these communities often see conflict between native residents and migrants who speak different languages. This is a point of tension, and Sachin, one of the participants, expressed how native residents “don’t like” migrants like himself. However, he described being on good terms with a multilingual community member who helped mediate conflicts.

We will talk together...and eat together. And uh, if something problem is there, the aunty will come and ask, “What happened? What’s happening? Tell me. I will take care about that” (Sachin)

Sachin and his family shared a close relationship with her, which gave him a sense of security and shielded him from some of the conflict and negativity in the neighbourhood. Participants gave credit for their achievement to educated community members who helped with their academics. As one participant stated about a neighbourhood resident,

She is studying master’s degree. She...then...I was not understanding math in 6th standard and my father told Akka (older sister) to help me. Then every day I was going at 6 o’clock and coming at 7 o’clock. Everything was clear, ma’am (Mira)

The students interviewed in this study had access to a fair amount of support in situations where their parents could not help due to lack of information, literacy, or time. As another participant said about a neighbour,

He helps, ma’am. Say- when I was joining in first, he helped me to join this school, he filled all the forms and he tried to come here and he- he finished this work over here and he went (Uday)

When Uday’s parents were unable to enrol him in school due to limited knowledge, he could rely on a community member to do so. Another student, Pavan, mentioned a cousin who gave him advice to help him achieve his goal of becoming a social worker. Many participants were born and brought up in their neighbourhoods and thought of their community as “friendly”. Even those who believed that their neighbourhoods were disadvantaged or unsafe agreed that even then, they had access to support that made their experience easier.

School Level Support and Structures

Parent-teacher interaction As acknowledged by the principal and students, the school helped foster relationships between parents and teachers. Apart from one participant, all others reported that their parents attended regular meetings with teachers to discuss their progress. The principal spoke about how parental investment and active involvement could be the distinguishing factors that encourage some children to succeed compared to others. She believed that parents who were more invested actively initiated conversation with teachers about their children. When asked her opinion on why some young people are high achievers, she mentioned parental investment.

Parents that take trouble...they come and ask whether children have studied and they see to their progress, and in the house they take a little extra trouble.

According to her, students were usually high achievers because of parents who tried to visit school and engage in conversation about their child’s progress.

Non-academic opportunities The case-study school was one that is well known in the area for promoting student participation in extra-curricular activities and providing platforms for them to demonstrate their talents. Many of the students agreed that they had been given opportunities beyond academics that helped them succeed and enjoy school.

If I was not playing football, I was not so good in school. Everyone knows that I play football, everyone comes to me and tells, "You play very good, I want to learn how you play, teach me" (Uday)

Uday admitted that being involved in sports helped him stay motivated, get along with others, and do well. Some students agreed that extra-curricular activities helped them set goals. Mira claimed that a self-learning space set up by the school encouraged her to learn more about computers and set that as her goal for the year. Most participants were part of clubs or activities and believed this could have contributed to their success through helping them get along with peers and being more motivated to attend school.

Supportive teacher relationships In the student interviews and principal interview, it was evident that school staff were invested in students' wellbeing. Students appeared to appreciate guidance from teachers, felt at ease approaching most of their teachers and the principal, and each student claimed that this helped them succeed in school. The principal described how some staff stayed after hours to teach and spoke individually to students if they noticed behavioral changes. Because a lot of students were from families where they did not have supportive or stable adult relationships, the teachers and principal often addressed personal issues if they "sensed" that something was troubling a student.

Although every student spoke about receiving academic help from teachers, the close relationship they shared with teachers that went beyond academics was noticeable in the interviews. One student mentioned how her teachers spoke to her about her "behavior" and how she took their advice.

Sometimes I am doing wrong means teachers who- the teacher will call me independently and talk about, "Why are you doing like that? Your behavior is changing. You should not do that like that". They'll inform me. Then I can change myself (Anushka)

Like Anushka, Priya emphasised how her teachers appreciated her work when she did well, cheered her up, and helped with "personal problems" too. When asked how her teachers helped her do well, Nikitha explained that when teachers realised that students were stressed, they spoke to them individually and offered solutions. One participant, Adithya, admitted he did not like school or have many friends. He seemed disinterested when asked about his family and peers, but when asked about his teachers, replied in a very different tone and with fondness he did not express earlier.

Teachers...teachers are really good, ma'am. And especially one teacher was very good with me. She was supporting, caring, always ma'am (Adithya)

It was evident from the students' anecdotes and tones that they felt very close to specific teachers who they relied on for support.

I liked the teachers, ma'am. The way they teach...they treat like their own children, no, ma'am? So I liked that (Chithra)

Chithra reminisced about how her teachers treated her like "their own children". She echoed the sentiments of the other students who credited their teachers for their school success.

Supportive family relationships

Parental support All participants attributed part of their success to close family relationships and a supportive home environment. Most expressed that their parents received very little to no education themselves but always attempted to help in other ways. While some participants spoke about a parent being unemployed or described their household as "poor", they credited their parents for checking if they had school supplies and funds required for school activities. Uday spoke about how it was difficult for his family to pay fees, but that his father always enquired if he needed anything for school.

If I need help, like I need money for the picnic trip, my father will help. And for football also, in the academy, if sometimes if I'll go out of my house, my father will tell "What do you need?...", I'll tell my father, he'll help me (Uday)

Most participants appeared to be grateful to their parents for trying to make school a smooth experience despite financial stress. To all participants, it was clear that despite financial hardship, their education was a priority for their families. This was evident in several interviews, where students described how parents went

out of their way to ensure that they had whatever they needed to achieve in school. As one student summarised the ways in which her parents helped her succeed,

Even though they are not educated they will try to help me. And they'll find tuitions and if it is- then too, if it is difficult for me, they'll come and talk with teachers (Priya)

Most participants also described how their relationships with their parents helped motivate them to do well and cope with the stress of studying.

Uh...they did not study, right? So they tell, "We did not study, education is the most powerful weapon which you have to get. Girls have to have education". So, they used to give some motivation...my father used to say like, "Whatever you want to study, study. Whatever you want to do, do. I will be with you, I will be there" (Jaya)

Jaya valued this motivation she received from her family. While many young people like her do not have the luxury of choosing their line of study or work due to lack of options and funds, she thought her parents gave her freedom and unconditional support to pursue whatever she wanted. This seemed to be a driving factor in her goal setting and aspirations. Similarly, others spoke about their parents "encouraging" and "motivating" them to do well, which may explain why these students had higher self-esteem and were motivated to do well and succeed in school.

Home structures and "rules" Sachin also described how his mother made an exception for household chores when he had a test coming up. Most students in the school whose parents work long hours are compelled to do household work after school including cooking, cleaning, and watching younger siblings. This results in students falling behind academically, but Sachin mentioned how his mother gave him space to focus on studying. This is one way in which parents who may not be equipped to supervise academics tried to maintain structure, which may have helped their children succeed in school. Uday also described how his parents, who could not help academically because they were not literate, enforced a routine by pushing him to study and limiting his time playing or using his phone. Out of all the participants, only one student, Adithya, did not directly credit his family members for his academic success and maintained that his achievements were a result of his determination and teacher support.

Individual level factors

Resilience All the participants demonstrated resilience, some through their accounts of upheavals in their lives. Adithya, who was a high achiever in school, mentioned the deterioration of his college grades but emphasised that he had improved and was determined to achieve. Jaya spoke of her family's financial situation that took a turn for the worse during her childhood, resulting in a move from a costlier private school to the current school. She described her struggle adjusting to the new environment and the new language, but followed up with describing how her father encouraged her and how her three siblings also joined the same school.

They (sisters and brother) used to share anything, whatever we speak, like we don't need outside people to come and join us and play with us! We four are enough to play everything! We fight, we talk...(Jaya)

It appeared that Jaya shared a very close relationship with her family, which may explain why she quickly adjusted to a strange environment during a time of financial duress for the family. Despite her struggle, her family provided encouragement and stability, which helped her learn quickly and become "equal" to the students in her new school. Other participants had similar turbulent experiences of parents becoming unemployed, or migrating from regions of the country affected by conflict, but described warm family relationships that may have protected them and helped them develop resilience. This echoes the idea that protective factors like family environment and parental support can promote resilience for disadvantaged children in such situations (Garmezy, 1991).

Goal-Oriented and Self-Esteem All participants were clear about their academic and career goals when asked. They had definitive steps that they needed to follow to attain higher education. While participants gave different reasons for wanting to succeed, they were all similarly goal oriented.

When asked if they felt like they "belonged" in the school and with their friends, almost all participants affirmed that they had close friends in school. However, some expressed their belief that they were "different"

from their peers. Although they were not able to elaborate to explain this belief, two of them stated that they knew they were different from others in some way. "I'm different. I have something. I know that" is what Adithya stated before explaining that his goals were different from those of his peers, while his curiosity and innovation set him apart and were more important than school grades. Mira also believed that she was "different" from other students and many participants expressed their desires and aspirations to do something "more" than the normal expectations from young people in their communities.

Many participants stated that support from their adult relationships encouraged them to dream big and not limit themselves to their circumstances, and this may have contributed to why they felt they were different and had "more" expectations than their peers. Jaya stated that while most young people like her only consider common professions such as software engineering, she was taught by her parents and teachers to "dream some big dreams" like going abroad, that most others from her background do not have. Because of the support participants received from their families, they seemed to have high self-esteem and believed they could accomplish more than the usual expectations. When asked about what motivated them to do well and achieve their goals, many of them expressed their desire for better lives for their families.

After education, I'll go to work. And they (parents)- they should sit at home ma'am, I should work and I should feed them (Chithra)

Many participants in the study cited this as a main reason for wanting to achieve their goals and expressed that their family situations made them want to accomplish more than their parents had the opportunity to.

If I study and if I will go to a higher level I will get a new job and I can work in that...and I can earn money. And I can help them (parents) in any way...if they are not feeling well, I can help in that. If they are not able to eat food, I can help in that (Mira)

Internal locus of control and self-efficacy All participants in the study believed that they were the ones in charge of their academic performance. While their goals differed, they all agreed that their hard work would determine their success. While the students were all from the same surrounding communities which were similar in terms of conflict, unemployment, and standards of living, only a very small number of them saw their community as "disadvantaged". While some participants acknowledged that they had family problems, very few of them related that to being part of a bigger problem or to the community being disadvantaged or deprived. This could perhaps have contributed to their self-esteem and self-efficacy, since they did not think of their circumstances as disadvantaged or unfortunate compared to those of others. Furthermore, some of them tended to think of their home and school lives as "separate", and while their experiences motivated them to build better lives, they maintained a boundary between the two. One student, when asked if issues at home or in the community affected his academic performance, stated the following.

I don't care about home ma'am. In school I will care about studying only (Sachin)

While the students acknowledged that they had issues at home and in the community, they did not think that these problems would affect their academic performance if they worked hard. When asked what, if anything, could stop them from doing well, some of them said their education was their responsibility and that the only things that could hinder their progress were their own choices like time management between classes and activities, or getting "distracted" in school, both of which were in their control.

The significance of supportive relationships was evident in the interviews, whether at a community, school, or family level. At the school level, there were structures in place for parent-teacher interaction. Students credited a large part of their success to supportive relationships with their parents and teachers. Individual factors such as resilience and goal-orientation also contributed to academic success for all the participants. Most of these factors were interrelated and influenced each other – high resilience and self-esteem could be results of adult relationships and support systems in students' lives. Similarly, school structures and relationships could have been motivating factors for them to set goals and develop confidence.

4. Discussion

The findings that emerged indicated that community support contributes to positive outcomes for young people, either directly in terms of academic support or in other aspects that helped them cope. These findings align with research that suggests neighbourhood cohesion is critical in shaping young people's aspirations for

the future or providing role models who demonstrate the importance of achievement (Stewart et al., 2007). Adolescents may not set high aspirations because they rarely interact with financially secure and successful neighbours in disadvantaged communities, and so are less likely to understand the benefits of success and achievement (South & Baumer, 2000). However, in this case, there was evidence that participants had support from community members who were role models and stressed the importance of school, or helped whenever required.

The findings showed how school structures and relationships were instrumental in helping young people succeed and align with existing literature. According to Harding (2010), living in disadvantaged areas can cause mistrust in the educational system that may be perpetuated and reinforced by older locals or peers who dropped out of school. In this case-study school, it was clear that the school facilitated contact between parents and teachers, which may have helped reduce mistrust or unapproachability. In disadvantaged contexts, parents may feel excluded from and uninvolved in their children's lives at school, and unable to help with academic work (Grant, 2009; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). This was most likely true for the case-study school, where most parents had little academic experience, so it was important that the school created encouraged parent-teacher dialogue and invested parents in their children's education, regardless of whether they could directly assist with academics or not. The school principal was aware that investing parents was a crucial requirement for students' academic success.

Research with at-risk youth in cities suggests that participation in extra-curricular activities is an enabler for academic success, and structured activities may protect adolescents and lead to positive psychosocial outcomes (Geary, 1988; Gilman et al., 2003). There are links between participation in extra-curricular activities and higher academic attainment, and achievement specifically for at-risk youth who had greater difficulty with interpersonal relationships (Mahoney et al., 2003). Being involved in extra-curricular activities is linked to goal self-regulation strategies and academic success, and being recognised for their talents may boost self-esteem and provide a sense of accomplishment for students (Lagacé-Séguin & Case, 2008; McMillan & Reed, 1994). The findings of this study are consistent with this wider literature; the school encouraged students to participate in activities, and students affirmed that this helped them set goals, get along with peers and feel a sense of belonging, all of which may have been factors for high achievement.

All participants in the study attributed part of their success to their teachers. Most participants had been at the school from a young age and spoke fondly about their early relationships with teachers. In early years of schooling, it is beneficial for children to develop positive relationships with teachers, which helps them adjust to school, form bonds, and build the skills to achieve academically (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). A survey with at-risk Native-American students also showed how they described specific behaviors of their teachers that helped them succeed, such as listening to them, providing advice, encouraging them to set and reach goals, and holding them to high expectations (Coburn & Nelson, 1989). All these examples also emerged in the interviews for this study where the teacher-student relationships went beyond academics, giving students stability and motivation.

Most participants affirmed that their parents' encouragement and help were important for their academic success. They explained how their parents, despite limited education, were able to contribute in other ways and instil a sense of responsibility in their children. Research shows that home environment and parental attitude impact children's success more than parents' education and actual contribution to academics (Snodgrass, 1991). Parental support can also lead to higher self-esteem in children (Amato 1988; Cripps & Zyromski, 2009), which may explain why all the participants who described supportive parent relationships showed signs of high self-esteem. This holds true for families that have experienced economic hardship – parental behavior during periods of hardship has a greater effect on adolescent self-esteem than the actual impacts of economic difficulty (Whitbeck et al., 1991). This concurs with the findings of this study, since participants who experienced financial upheaval describe how their families helped them adjust and believe in their ability to achieve. Werner (2000) further points out that it is not only supportive parent relationships that can protect young people, but also other family relationships with siblings and grandparents. While participants mostly spoke about their parents, some mentioned the bonds they shared with their siblings or cousins who were a source of support as well.

In longitudinal studies with children experiencing stressful high-risk factors such as divorce and poverty, self-efficacy and a sense of competence were linked to resilience (Werner, 2000). Children who have problems at home are more likely to engage in activities in school that give them a sense of aptitude and competence, and this is reflected in the findings where most participants were involved in activities that helped them feel competent and set goals. This could have led to higher self-efficacy and resilience. As previously discussed, a healthy and nurturing relationship with one or both parents can also improve self-esteem, and most participants reported having supportive parents. These, along with other nurturing relationships may have helped them build self-esteem.

Common traits among young achievers that differentiate them from their peers are their internal locus of control and achievement-orientation (Werner, 2000). Resilient students have more long-term goals (Novotny, 2011). Each participant in this study described their goals for higher education or their desired professions. They also believed they were responsible for their academic performance and did not blame or cite their circumstances as a reason to underperform. Some clearly separated their home life and school life, saying that the former did not bear relation to their academic performance, maintaining that they were in charge. This could be a sign of high self-efficacy, similar to what some of the literature also describes – resilient students usually do not believe their family or neighbourhood issues are important to their academic achievement (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

5. Conclusion and Future Considerations

The young people in this study described factors from almost all aspects of their lives that were responsible in some part for their academic success. Child development is a combination and “coincidence” of multiple influences in an individual’s life (Novotný, 2011). This was evident in the findings, since there were factors at every level of the participants’ lives that contributed to their resilience and achievement. What stands out is the amount of credit participants gave to supportive adults in their lives. These relationships seem to have helped them achieve directly through academic and financial help, and indirectly by influencing their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

While most existing research is based in Western contexts, there are studies that have been conducted with diverse populations and minority groups which suggest resilience is context-specific and dependent on culture (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). The findings from this study seem to be consistent with wider literature and can begin to fill the gap that exists in Indian research for young people living in areas of disadvantage. While it demonstrated that a combination of individual, family, school, and wider community factors and relationships influence young people’s achievement, further research is required in an Indian context. There are multiple layers of disadvantage that are yet to be addressed in addition to socioeconomic status and neighbourhood disadvantage. Some of these, such as caste-privilege and disadvantage, gender differences, and geographical disadvantage can influence (and sometimes determine) educational attainment and achievement levels. It is important to explore more of these levels of disadvantage and inequity, to be able to apply findings to more communities and design suitable interventions for young people. Given the many recent and ongoing attempts to fight educational inequity through funding and social initiatives, more qualitative and focused research in this area may guide interventions and policy in a developing country like India.

The findings of this study have implications for stakeholders in young people’s education at different levels. For policy makers, the findings show a need for additional funding and emphasis for programmes and support mechanisms to enable the most disadvantaged communities, families, and students mediate the challenges presented by poverty. For school administrators and staff, the findings show how critical it may be to appoint teachers and principals who demonstrate a knowledge of the area and context within which the school operates. There is also a need to create and sustain meaningful engagement opportunities for schools, communities, and families. Establishing processes and mechanisms that allow these tripartite connections to be made should be a priority for schools. Teachers should be able to relate to and understand the lives of young people, in addition to understanding their context of disadvantage, and aim to embrace stimulating approaches to learning in order to engage all young people. Families, too, should be provided with support – not only in helping their child in school, but in their own learning and development as well.

Together, the findings may help families and teachers understand some of the factors that contribute to a student's achievement, therefore enabling them to better support young people, with their wellbeing at the centre. These findings are applicable to not only Indian contexts, but have value for disadvantaged communities globally, especially those in low-income countries with similar populations.

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