What helps students cope with academic setbacks? A sense of belonging at school is key

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Academic challenges and difficulties are inevitable parts of school—this is how students learn. So researchers have long been interested in the ways students navigate these challenges and how to help them cope better.

Recent research has focused on the concept of "academic buoyancy" or everyday resilience at school. This is about students' capacity to handle everyday setbacks and challenges. This could include negative feedback on an assessment or facing competing study deadlines and schoolwork demands.

Research has found resilient students tend to have more positive academic outcomes. These include making greater effort with their work, having better study skills and enjoying school more than students who are less resilient.

Research has also shown resilience is underpinned by personal attributes such as confidence. But we need more understanding about what school-related factors are involved in students' resilience and what schools can do to build their students' resilience.

Our study surveyed high school students in schools around New South Wales to look at what other factors impact students' resilience.

Our research

The study was based on responses from 71,861 high school students in 292 NSW government schools who completed the annual "Tell Them From Me" student survey organized by the state's Department of Education.

Students' responses were collected at two points one year apart: once at the beginning of the 2018 school year when students were in Years 7 to 11 and then a year later in 2019 when they were in Years 8 to 12. Schools were in metropolitan, rural and regional areas.

One of our main aims was to find out if students' perceptions of different types of support in their school would influence their resilience

one year later.

This included academic and [emotional support](link) from teachers, students' sense of school belonging and behavioral expectations in the classroom.

We looked at the role of support factors in two ways. First, we looked at how support for individual students was associated with students' resilience. For example, does a student who perceives greater academic support from their teacher, regardless of the school they are in, report greater resilience one year later?

Second, we investigated the relationship between support at the whole-school level and whole-school resilience.

Our findings

In our study, students' sense of school belonging stood out as the most notable factor of resilience. In fact, the role of school belonging was important at the individual student level and also at the whole-school level.

That is, when individual students felt a greater sense of belonging to their school, they tended to also report greater resilience one year later.

When a school had a higher proportion of students reporting a sense of belonging, it demonstrated higher school-average resilience one year later.

There was also evidence of a reciprocal relationship between students' sense of belonging and their resilience—that is, increases in school belonging were associated with greater resilience one year later and vice versa.

Notably, these findings were largely similar across contexts, including schools of different sizes, in different locations, with different gender compositions, with varying levels of academic selectivity, with a range of socioeconomic status and with varying levels of students' academic ability.

The similarity in the findings across contexts suggests targeting these areas of support could benefit students' resilience in a wide range of academic settings.

Why is this so?

When faced with everyday academic setbacks and challenge, having a strong sense of school belonging helps to protect students from stress and negativity.

This is because students feel less isolated at times of adversity and have options and opportunities for support from their peers and teachers.

Evidence of the reciprocal relationship among these factors also suggests facilitating a greater sense of belonging could have long-lasting effects on students' resilience as they positively feed into each other over time.

How can we boost belonging?

Helping students to feel safe and included in their school is one way to promote a greater sense of belonging for students. This could include:

- offering a range of extracurricular activities that help students to get involved and feel part of their school community
- anti-bullying or well-being programs to help students to feel safer and more comfortable in their schools

- helping students build and feel confident in their personal identities at school.

Teaching students to be aware of their emotions

There are also strategies for targeting students' resilience directly. For example, providing students with specific reasoning behind a poor assessment mark and then time (in class or one-on-one) to help them understand and constructively respond to the challenging feedback.

Students might also be taught to be aware of the thoughts, behaviors and emotions they have when they receive a disappointing result and how they can respond constructively. For example, re-framing the event as a learning opportunity or a time to seek out further information from a teacher is one way to focus on self-improvement rather than the disappointing result.

Amid ongoing concerns about young people's mental health and well-being, academic resilience is an important attribute that helps students to navigate their school careers.

More resources for teachers can be found in this guide to everyday resilience published by the NSW Department of Education. The authors also wish to thank Nicole Hare, Samuel Cox, Anaid Flesken and Ian McCarthy at the Center for Education Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Department of Education, for their assistance with the conduct of this research and co-authorship of the original journal article.

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