

# Effectiveness of Empathy Training in Increasing Resilience and Academic Self-Efficacy among High School Students in Zahedan

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## ABSTRACT

Self-efficacy, as a motivational factor, increases academic performance and decreases stress. Therefore, identifying factors affecting self-efficacy can play a key role in improving students' academic achievement and promoting an educational system. In this regard, this study aimed to examine the effectiveness of empathy training in increasing resilience and academic self-efficacy among high school students in Zahedan. This quasi-experimental study followed by a two-group pretest-posttest design. Statistical population of the current study included all male senior high school students in Zahedan in the academic year 2016-2017. A corpus of 30 students was selected using a multistage random sampling method. Data collection tools used to achieve the main objective of the present study were McElroy and Bunting Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (2002) and Connor and Davidson Resilience Scale (2003). Descriptive statistics, like calculating means and standard deviations, and inferential statistics, including univariate analyses of variance, were applied for data analysis. Results of this study demonstrated that mean scores of the experimental group on resilience and academic self-efficacy increased compared to those of the control group. It can be mentioned that empathy training affected resilience and academic self-efficacy among the male high school students in Zahedan; therefore, the results of this study revealed the importance of empathy in students' communications.

**Keywords:** Academic Self-Efficacy, Empathy, Resilience, Students.

## Introduction

Among the major goals of education systems are providing the grounds for individuals' growth and training healthy, efficient, and responsible people who can play significant roles in their personal and social lives. Since students are the main pillars of an education system in a country, they play special roles in achieving goals determined by that education system. Hence, paying attention to this class of society can aid the education system to grow. However, among all students who enter the education system, few of them can employ all their talents, succeed, and have good academic performances. The most

significant and influential factors playing role in students' academic performance are psychological factors<sup>[1]</sup>. It seems that an important psychological feature that affects academic performance is academic self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was initially introduced by Albert Bandura in the form of a social-cognitive theory. Self-efficacy and factors affecting it have attracted many educational psychologists' and experts' attention for many years. Academic self-efficacy is regarded as an important factor since it affects many aspects of people's lives through putting a lot of effort into and insisting on doing homework assignments, applying cognitive and metacognitive strategies, using self-organization methods, being sustainable in the face of difficulties, selecting a field, and the like<sup>[2]</sup>.

On the other hand, successful resistance to challenging situations makes people able to deal with less chronic stressors and decreases adverse effects of these stressors on their health. This is known as resilience. Resilience is considered as one of the most influential structures in increasing educational productivity and has attracted a lot of researchers' attention in the past ten years<sup>[3]</sup>. Resilience is known as a successful adaptation that becomes evident when dealing with difficulties and disabling stressors. This definition of resilience reflects the function and dynamics of this instrument which requires

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establishing complex interactions among risk factors and protectors <sup>[4]</sup>. Simply, resilience is a positive adaptation to adverse conditions <sup>[5]</sup>.

Research has indicated the important role of resilience and academic self-efficacy in promoting academic achievement and academic performance. For instance, in a study aimed at examining the relationship of resilience and attachment styles with academic achievement among university students, Saadat et al. (2015) showed that resilience was significantly and directly related to academic achievement <sup>[6]</sup>. In another study conducted on students by Zabihi et al. (2012), results revealed that resilience and academic achievement were significantly and directly correlated <sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, Karimzadeh and Mohseni (2006) demonstrated that academic self-efficacy (effort, context, and talent) was related to academic achievement <sup>[8]</sup>. In alignment with other studies, Zeinlipoor et al. (2009) indicated that general self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy were significantly and directly related to academic performance <sup>[9]</sup>.

To enhance resilience, therapists applied positive psychotherapy <sup>[10]</sup>, life skills training <sup>[11]</sup>, and memory of special events training <sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, to promote academic self-efficacy, various approaches and therapies including motivational interviewing training <sup>[13]</sup>, assertiveness training <sup>[14]</sup>, and emotion regulation training <sup>[15]</sup> were used. Among the interventions that seem to be effective in promoting resilience and academic self-efficacy, empathy training can be mentioned. For the first time, the term *empathy* was used in the early 20th century by Lipps in his psychological research. Empathy is a concept in the field of psychology and in interpersonal interactions <sup>[16]</sup>.

Empathy means that one can understand others' lives even when he/she is not in those situations. It aids people to accept and respect people who are different from us. People who have this ability, are interested in other people, are affectionate, and are able to tolerate various types of people. Empathy improves social relationships and creates supportive and accepting behaviors towards other human beings <sup>[17]</sup>. Using empathy, people become able to accept and perceive others' thoughts and behaviors as they really are and respond to them appropriately <sup>[18]</sup>. In a study carried out to investigate the effects of empathy training on establishing positive relations with others in families who had a mentally ill patient, Shams Azar and Narimani (2015) found out that empathy training was effective in having positive relationships with others <sup>[19]</sup>. They argued that when using the taught strategies, families with a mentally ill patient became able to deal with their issues efficiently, interact with others effectively, and their adaptation increased. In the same line, Strayer and Roberts (2004) showed that children who had low levels of empathy displayed more aggressive behaviors compared to others <sup>[20]</sup>. Furthermore, Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) indicated a negative relationship between antisocial behaviors and levels of empathy among adolescents <sup>[21]</sup>.

Another important issue is the special status of students in the future developments of every society. In this regard, education, as a source of training human resources for the future, is of significant importance. Since our country is a young community and the age pyramid is mostly built-up by youth, competition in continuing the education, entering a university, choosing the right field of study, and finding a good job are of particular significance. Due to being in sensitive periods of adolescence and early adulthood, students, especially high school students, are exposed to extreme emotional pressures, conflicts, fateful choices, and competitions. These pressures can facilitate or weaken students' progress and ultimate success. Since emotional factors play such key roles, schools should pay

attention to this aspect of education which includes considering methods of managing and dealing with pressures aimed at maintaining students' interests. Therefore, given what was noted earlier, a lack of research aimed at examining the effectiveness of the mentioned intervention, and the key role of empathy training in increasing resilience and academic self-efficacy, this study aimed to examine the effectiveness of empathy training in promoting resilience and academic self-efficacy among high school students in Zahedan. The present study sought to answer the following research question:

Is empathy training effective in increasing resilience and academic self-efficacy among high school students in Zahedan?

## Methods and Materials

This quasi-experimental study followed by a two-group (an experimental group and a control group) pretest-posttest design. Statistical population of the current study included all male senior high school students in Zahedan in the academic year 2016-2017. To select a sample, a multistage random sampling method was applied, such that among all senior high schools in Zahedan, a high school was randomly chosen. Afterward, among all classes held in various grades (seventh, eighth, and ninth), students studying in the eighth grade were randomly selected (a corpus of 30 students including 15 students assigned to the experimental group and 15 students assigned to the control group). Inclusion criteria of this study were not having a history of being hospitalized in mental hospitals, not having a history of drug abuse, not being under any other treatments or not taking part in any other psychological interventions, and being eager to take part in the current study based on the diagnosis in an interview. Exclusion criterion of the present study was not taking part in eight training sessions. The students who assigned to the experimental group took part in eight 60-minute empathy training sessions. These sessions were held twice a week for a month. However, the control group did not receive any such training. Topics and objectives of the training sessions were as follows:

**Table 1: Topics and objectives of the training sessions**

Session	Objectives	Procedures
First	Creating relations and becoming familiar with the students	- Becoming familiar with the members - Creating good relationships with the students
	- Explaining structures of these training sessions	- Establishing rules of these sessions
Second	- Becoming familiar with physiological feelings	- Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, etc.)
	- Identifying one's feeling	- Presenting a homework assignment
	- Identifying other people's feelings	- Receiving feedback
Third	- Expressing one's feelings	
	- Becoming familiar with physiological feelings	- Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, etc.)
	- Identifying one's	

	feeling	-	Presenting a homework assignment
	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Becoming familiar with psychological feelings	-	Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, painting, etc.)
Fourth	- Identifying one's feeling	-	Presenting a homework assignment
	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Expressing one's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Becoming familiar with psychological feelings	-	Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, painting, etc.)
Fifth	- Identifying one's feeling	-	Presenting a homework assignment
	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Expressing one's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Identifying one's feeling	-	Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, painting, etc.)
Sixth	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Presenting a homework assignment
	- Expressing one's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Strengthening empathic responding	-	Doing related activities (role-playing, reading a poem, painting, etc.)
	- Identifying one's feeling	-	Presenting a homework assignment
Seventh	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Receiving feedback
	- Empowering the students to use empathy skills	-	Receiving feedback
	- Evaluating empathy	-	Evaluating the students' empathy
	- Identifying one's feeling	-	Holding an exhibition of the students' activities
Eighth	- Identifying other people's feelings	-	Conducting the posttest
	- Expressing one's feelings	-	Holding a closing ceremony
	- Conducting a posttest	-	
Summary of the objectives of the training sessions			

Data collection tools used to achieve the main objective of the present study were as follows:

**Self-Efficacy Questionnaire:** This questionnaire which was developed by McElroy and Bunting (2002) measures academic behaviors [22], programs, and organizations among students and university students. This questionnaire includes 10 items and students can respond to its items based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from totally agree (1) to totally disagree (7). Therefore, scores range from 10 to 70. Higher scores indicate higher academic self-efficacy. McElroy and Bunting (2002) demonstrated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was 0.81. Moreover, using a

confirmatory factor analysis, indices of the construct validity of this questionnaire were AGFI=0.98, GFI=0.99, and RMSEA=0.02. These indices indicated the proper fitness of this questionnaire with the data. Lavasani et al. (2009) demonstrated that the internal consistency of this questionnaire was 0.75 [23].

**Connor and Davidson Resilience Scale:** This is a 25-item scale that measures the construct of resilience using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Each item is scored based on this Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (totally wrong) to 4 (totally true). The minimum score is zero and the maximum score is 100. Results of a study carried out to examine the psychometric properties of this scale in normal and patient samples confirmed its validity and reliability [24]. Mohammadi (2005) performed this scale on 248 students and indicated that its internal consistency was 0.89 [25]. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the whole scale was 0.82.

In the current study, all ethical considerations, including keeping the obtained data confidential, filling out the questionnaires anonymously, obtaining the informed consent of all the participants, and being able to abandon the study, were all observed. All the data were analyzed using SPSS. To examine research hypotheses, one-way analyses of covariance were applied.

## Results

Table 2 presents descriptive results.

Variable	Group	N	M	SD		
Resilience	Control	Pretest	15	49	15.63	
		Posttest	15	49.67	15.44	
	Experimental	Pretest	15	48.80	14.66	
		Posttest	15	51.40	15.16	
	Academic self-efficacy	Control	Pretest	15	42.26	14.02
			Posttest	15	43	13.79
Experimental		Pretest	15	43.86	12.96	
		Posttest	15	48	13.01	
Means and standard deviations of scores on resilience and academic self-efficacy obtained by both groups						

Table 2 presented the means and standard deviations of the scores on resilience and academic self-efficacy obtained by the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest. As can be seen, there is not any difference in the mean scores of the control group on these variables in the pretest and posttest. However, the mean scores of the experimental group on these variables in the posttest are greater than those obtained by them in the pretest.

Table 3: means and standard deviations of the scores on resilience and academic self-efficacy obtained by the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	Sig
Pretest	6460.025	1	6460.025	1799.861	0.01
Group	28.044	1	28.044	7.813	0.01
Error	96.908	27	3.589		

Total	6579.467	29
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Results of the analysis of covariance conducted to compare resilience among the students in the experimental and control groups

Table 3 indicates the results of the analysis of covariance conducted to compare the scores on resilience obtained by the experimental and control groups in the posttest. The value of F is equal to 7.813 and it is significant at the 0.01 confidence level. This result rejects the null hypothesis and confirms the research hypothesis of the current study. Given the fact that the mean score of the experimental group on resilience obtained in the posttest is greater than that obtained in the pretest, it can be concluded that empathy training is effective in increasing resilience among the students.

**Table 4: analysis of covariance conducted to compare the scores on resilience obtained by the experimental and control groups in the posttest**

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean of squares	F	Sig
Pretest	5013.760	1	5013.760	7421.599	0.01
Group	87.120	1	87.120	128.959	0.01
Error	18.240	27	0.676		
Total	5219.50	29			

Results of the analysis of covariance conducted to compare academic self-efficacy among the students in the experimental and control groups

Table 4 shows the results of the analysis of covariance conducted to compare the scores on academic self-efficacy obtained by the experimental and control groups in the posttest. The value of F is equal to 128.959 and it is significant at the 0.01 confidence level. This result rejects the null hypothesis and confirms the research hypothesis of the current study. Given the fact that the mean score of the experimental group on academic self-efficacy obtained in the posttest is greater than that obtained in the pretest, it can be concluded that empathy training is effective in increasing academic self-efficacy among the students.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of empathy training in increasing resilience and academic self-efficacy among the high school students in Zahedan. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in resilience between the experimental and control groups and the level of resilience was higher among the experimental group compared to the control group. This indicated that empathy training affected resilience among the students. Therefore, it can be noted that empathy training increased resilience. This finding is in line with results of similar studies. In a study carried out to investigate the effects of empathy training on establishing positive relations with others in families who had a mentally ill patient, Shams Azar and Narimani (2015) found out that empathy training was effective in having positive relationships with others<sup>[19]</sup>. They argued that when using the taught strategies, families with a mentally ill patient became able to deal with their issues efficiently, interact with others effectively, and their adaptation increased. Beglian Koulemarzi et al. (2013) revealed that empathy training was effective in improving interpersonal relationships and emotional self-regulation among students with symptoms of ADHD<sup>[26]</sup>.

To explain this hypothesis, it can be stated that many theories put an emphasis on the facts that high empathy prevents antisocial behaviors, encourages altruistic behaviors, and increases positive social behaviors. A person who has high empathy can experience a number of positive emotions including comfort and happiness. These emotions themselves strengthen desirable social behaviors. On the other hand, low levels of empathy, due to limiting a person's ability in understanding and experiencing others' feelings, create antisocial behaviors. A lack of empathy creates a barrier to one's ability to enjoy others' positive emotions<sup>[21]</sup>. Empathy is an emotion that makes students aware of their responsibilities and provokes their consciences. This is what drives students to patience and compassion, to understand others' needs, and to provide adequate care for those who are injured or in trouble. A child who learns empathy is more understanding, compassionate, and capable of managing pressures with which he/she has to face compared to others.

Moreover, other results of this study indicated that there was a significant difference in academic self-efficacy between the experimental and control groups. The level of academic self-efficacy was higher among the experimental group compared to the control group. This indicated that empathy training affected academic self-efficacy among the students. Therefore, it can be noted that empathy training increased academic self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with results of similar studies. Although almost no studies carried out to examine empathy were found, results of a study conducted by Mostafaei and Mohammadi (2016) indicated that positive self-talk was effective in increasing self-efficacy among students<sup>[27]</sup>. Additionally, a similar study demonstrated that holding workshops aimed at training life skills including empathy was significantly effective in promoting self-esteem and academic self-efficacy among students. The results of the mentioned study showed that students placed in the experimental groups obtained significantly higher scores on self-esteem and academic self-efficacy compared to the control group<sup>[28]</sup>. Research on empathy training revealed that empathy training improved empathic feelings and aided people to understand others' social behaviors<sup>[29]</sup>.

To explain this finding, it can be mentioned that empathy is an important ability that matches a person's emotions with others' feelings, aids him/her to establish good relationships with the social world, encourages him/her to help others, and prevents him/her from hurting others' feelings. Empathy is the motivating force for social behaviors which leads to group cohesion<sup>[30]</sup>. Establishing good interactions with others increases self-esteem and academic self-efficacy among students. Adolescents and young people who learn the social rules and build strong relationships with their families and others develop high levels of self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and academic achievement.

Since the academic year had ended, no follow-ups could be carried out. This can be mentioned as the main limitation of this study. Given the effectiveness of empathy training in resilience, school counselors are recommended to train empathy skills to parents of students. Moreover, considering the effectiveness of empathy training in academic self-efficacy, school counselors are suggested to take teaching empathy skills to students into consideration. Through training such skills, students can be helped to increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy. To confirm these findings, other studies should be carried out on other samples, including normal, mentally retarded, and gifted students, students with learning

disabilities, and students with autism, and other educational levels.

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