ISSN: 2714-2965 (Print)
ISSN: 2714-3449 (Online)
University of the Gambia supported edition
The African Journal of Behavioural and Scale Development Research
AJB-SDR Vol. 7, No 1, 2025

Soft Skills and Academic Resilience Among Secondary School Students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This study examined the linear relationship between the components of soft skills (communication skill, problem solving skill, critical thinking skill, and time management skill) and the component of academic resilience (confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment) among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Correlational research design was used in the study. A total of 1,053 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students were selected from a population of 20,434 students in public secondary schools using multistage sampling techniques. The "Soft Skills and Academic Resilience Questionnaire" (SSARQ) was used for data collection. The instrument was validated by three experts, and it yielded a reliability coefficient of .79 using the Cronbach Alpha Method. Canonical correlation analysis was used to test the hypothesis at .05 level of significance. Findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between the components of soft skills and the components of academic resilience among secondary school students, and common variance shared between data sets was found to be 28%. Based on these findings, it was recommended among others that the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with curriculum developers and educational boards, should embed structured soft skill modules into existing subjects.
Keywords: Communication Skill, Problem-Solving Skill, Critical Thinking, Time Management, Academic Resilience.

Introduction
The learning setting of the 21st century has completely transformed with a focus not just on learning the traditional curriculum but also on building valuable skills for life. In the past, success at school was most typically measured by students' mastery of subjects like arithmetic, natural sciences and literacy. But the shift in the world economy, technological advancements, and the fluidity of work redirected this focus. Educational achievement and success beyond the classroom now more heavily rely on a broader set of skills, including non-cognitive traits generally referred to as soft skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Soft skills are a variety of cognitive and self-management abilities that are essential for success in both personal and professional spheres but not taught in schools. They consist of decision-making, analytical reasoning, effective communication, emotional awareness, time management, and flexibility. Trilling and Fadel (2009), describes soft skills as the most in-demand competencies in the contemporary workplace. In education, soft skills enhance the overall growth of students, which is aimed at the growth of the student in cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural dimensions. The goal is not only to prepare students examination-wise but to equip them with the ability to solve real-life problems, form robust relationships, and be resilient in the face of adversity (OECD, 2015). Students are now expected to collaborate, think critically, communicate, and control time and feelings; these all fall under the category of soft skills.

Further, in this highly networked and rapidly changing world, academic achievement alone is no longer a guarantee of success. Success over the course of a lifetime more and more depends upon the degree to which people can adapt, innovate, and collaborate. Schools are thus being requested to integrate soft skills into their curricula and assessment standards so that students are equipped not just for intellectual endeavours, but also for civic and economic participation (National Research Council, 2012). In learners, these skills are not only critical to academic success but are also markers of academic resilience, or the ability of a learner to manage stress, failures, and challenges (Martin & Marsh, 2006).

Soft skills' components are at the heart of learning and psychological adjustment in school settings (Heckman & Kautz, 2018). These abilities allow learners to engage meaningfully in classroom discussion, critically read and analyze information, work with others, and

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organize study timetables effectively. Lack of any one of these skills can lead to academic underachievement and heightened susceptibility to stress, whereas proficiency in these abilities can be a protective factor against academic adversity (Lippman et al., 2015).

Clear and purposeful communication forms the backbone of effective learning, collaboration, and emotional regulation within the school environment. It includes having the capacity to communicate effectively, listen actively, give and receive feedback, and effectively communicate with teachers and peers. Efficient communicators are more likely to seek assistance, clarify misunderstandings, and solve academic or social problems and enhance their handling of academic challenges and interpersonal resilience. Also, problem-solving entails problem detection, solution production, alternative consideration, and efficient decision realization (Lippman et al., 2015). For students in an academic setting, they regularly face complex assignments and obstacles. Students who can work independently to solve problems are more likely to remain committed to difficulty, and managing failure.

According to Faciano (2015), critical thinking is the capacity to evaluate information impartially, reason logically, and reach well-informed conclusions. It allows students to thoroughly examine study materials, question assumptions, and apply knowledge creatively from one context to another. Students with good critical thinking skills will exhibit higher levels of calmness and flexibility within learning environments, especially in conditions of pressure or uncertainty. Another component is time management skill, it involves prioritizing tasks, setting goals, reducing procrastination, and controlling the time allocated to studies. It is a critical academic soft skill that enables students to deal with various tasks proficiently and reduce academic stress. Time management plays significant roles in students' self-regulation and motivation, which are critical factors of academic resilience. When combined, these soft skills significantly affect learners' academic engagement. Students with good soft skills are more attentive in class, confident in sharing ideas, and better equipped to handle the pressures of schoolwork (Masten, 2014). They will be more likely to complete work on time, collaborate well in a team, and persevere in the face of adversity.

Education research has witnessed academic resilience become a significant protective variable in the achievement of students. The ability of students to effectively navigate academic challenges, recover from setbacks, and maintain optimism in the face of adversity is known as academic resilience (Martin, 2013). Academic resilience is not the same as fixed traits, which are rigid, but can be attained through targeted skill development. Closely related to this are the components that shape resilient behaviour self-confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment all of which are strengthened by students' acquisition and application of soft skills.

Self-confidence is students' belief in their academic competence and efficacy to perform well on learning activities (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Students who are confident are more likely to take chances in their studies, persevere through setbacks, and have faith in their ability to solve problems and think critically. This self-efficacy is facilitated by soft skills which allow students to interact with others and the material in the best possible way. Similarly, self-control is the capacity for regulating emotions, impulses, and actions, especially in times of stress or with difficult tasks (Duckworth *et al*., 2007). It enables learners to keep distractions at bay, remain concentrative on study, and manage stress. Time management and problem-solving are abilities that reinforce self-control since they encourage discipline and systematic engagement with learning tasks.

In the same way, composure is the ability to stay calm, focused, and emotionally stable under stressed academic situations such as exams, group projects, or failure. Students with good composure will not easily get panicked and can stay clear-headed in making decisions. Critical thinking and time management facilitate composure through systematic ways of handling challenges. Commitment on the other hand, is the student's capacity to persevere in achieving academic goals despite obstacles or competing interests (Masten, 2014). Commitment is consistency in effort and participation. Students with effective time management ability and communication skills are better equipped to be committed as they can plan well and seek social support when needed.

Empirical research and theoretical frameworks

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both emphasize this link, showing how behavioural traits and personal competencies are crucial to learners' capacity to persevere, and succeed in the face of academic difficulties. Academic resilience is the capacity of students to overcome academic setbacks, persevere in the face of learning obstacles, maintain motivation, and keep long-term educational goals in mind in the face of hardship (Cassidy, 2015). This psychologic resilience is closely linked to mastery and application of soft skills, both of which predict and facilitate resilient behaviour in a variety of educational settings.

Building on this understanding, the theoretical foundation of the present study is grounded in Bandura's Social-Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes the reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behaviour, and environmental influences, a process known as reciprocal determinism. Within this framework, learning and adaptation are active processes shaped by individuals' beliefs in their capabilities (self-efficacy), their capacity for self-regulation, and the reinforcement patterns within their environment. This framework is particularly relevant to the present study, as both soft skills and academic resilience reflect self-regulatory and adaptive capacities that determine how students respond to academic challenges. Soft skills such as time management, problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking serve as behavioural expressions of social-cognitive functioning, enabling students to regulate their learning, sustain motivation, and cope effectively with academic stressors. In the Nigerian and broader Sub-Saharan African context, where students often face resource shortage, overcrowded classroom, and socio-economic stress, the application of Social-Cognitive Theory becomes particularly meaningful. Within such environments, soft skills serve as psychological assets that foster academic resilience.

Empirically, cross-research has universally attested that soft skills are directly linked with resilience indicators such as confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment. Masten (2014) illustrates resilience as "ordinary magic" on the basis of everyday competencies such as planning, communication, and emotion regulation. These competencies are honed and expressed in the form of soft skills. For example, good communication yields social connectedness and help-seeking behaviour, which serve to buffer academic frustration. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills enable learners to examine stressful circumstances critically, reflect on coping solutions, and implement adaptive maneuvers, key indicators of resilient functioning. Besides, time management has been discovered to predict academic persistence and mitigate burnout, thereby supporting the resiliency dimensions of composure and commitment (Kearns & Gardiner, 2017). Similarly, problem-solving ability has been linked with students' capacity to reframe problems, maintain confidence, and recover from failure (Heckman & Kautz, 2018).

Several studies have explored this intersection. For instance, Lippman et al. (2015) found that soft skills were one of the strongest predictors of student resilience and long-term academic success in different learning environments. Succi and Canovi (2020) showed that university students with strong interpersonal and self-regulatory skills were better equipped to manage academic stress and uncertainty. According to Oboegbulem and Onu (2021), students in Nigeria who perform poorly academically frequently lack the critical soft skills necessary to deal with the demands of school life. They underlined how crucial it is to incorporate these abilities into academic programs in order to promote students' success and general development.

In the Nigerian education system, especially in Akwa Ibom State, issues like poor academic performance, negative coping, and school disengagement are rising by the day. Whereas much has been given to infrastructural and socioeconomic factors, students' internal abilities most importantly, their soft skills tend to be overlooked (Okorie, 2017; Oboegbulem & Onu, 2021). Many of these students are not only struggling with course content but also with coping with time management, conflict resolution, or effective communication within the classroom. These challenges may undermine their capability to acquire resilience in learning. With the intense and dynamic character of modern education, especially the incorporation of technology, collaborative learning, and relentless testing, there is a timely need to know more about how students' soft skills relate to academic resilience.

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Education in the 21st century demands more than the acquisition of academic knowledge; it requires the development of essential skills that enable learners to think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, manage time, and adapt to change. These competencies, often referred to as soft skills, are central to students' ability to learn independently, interact productively with others, and overcome academic and personal challenges. Academic resilience, on the other hand, reflects students' capacity to remain confident, composed, self-controlled, and committed in the face of difficulties encountered in their learning process.

Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of these attributes, many students continue to experience academic stress, low confidence, poor composure, and limited persistence when confronted with school-related challenges. This situation suggests a gap in the integration and development of soft skills that can strengthen students' academic resilience. While schools emphasize cognitive achievement, less attention is often given to fostering these non-cognitive skills that support emotional stability and sustained motivation in learning contexts. Given this situation, there is a need to explore the relationship between soft skill variables (communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and time management) and components of academic resilience, including confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment. Understanding how these variables interact will provide insights into how the enhancement of soft skills can promote greater academic resilience among students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

i. To examine the linear relationship between soft skill variables (communication skill, problem solving skill, critical thinking skill and time management skills) and the components of academic resilience (confidence, self-control, composure and commitment) among students.

Research Hypothesis

There is no significant linear relationship between soft skill variables (communication skill, problem solving skill, critical thinking skill and time management skills) and the components of academic resilience (confidence, self-control, composure and commitment) among students.

Research Method

This study employed the correlational research design, which is appropriate for examining the direction and extent of the relationship between two or more variables. The design was utilized to determine the linear relationship between soft skill variables and academic resilience components among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study population consisted of all Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools across Akwa Ibom State. At the time of the study, there were 20,432 SS2 students enrolled in 237 public secondary schools across the 31 Local Government Areas (LGAs), according to data from the State Secondary Education Board. A multistage sampling technique was adopted. The state was first divided into its three senatorial districts (Akwa Ibom North-East, Akwa Ibom North-West, and Akwa Ibom South). Two LGAs were randomly selected from each senatorial district, making six LGAs. From each selected LGA, three public secondary schools were sampled, giving a total of 18 schools.

Using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for determining sample size from a known population, a sample of 1,053 students was found to be adequate. Out of the distributed questionnaires, 1,035 (98.3%) were correctly completed and returned, and these were used for data analysis. The main instrument for data collection was a researcher-developed questionnaire titled “Soft Skills and Academic Resilience Questionnaire (SSARQ)”. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Section A: Measured four soft skill dimensions communication skills, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and time management skills, while section B: Assessed the four components of academic resilience, confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment. All responses were rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale: All the Time (4 points), Most of the Time (3 points), Some of the Time (2 points), and Not Always (1 point).

To ensure content validity, three experts from the Department of Psychological Foundations of

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Education, University of Uyo, reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, and coverage of constructs. The Content Validity Index (CVI) for the instrument was 0.87, while the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) for individual items ranged between 0.71 and 1.00, indicating good content adequacy. A pilot study involving 30 students from a public secondary school not included in the main study was conducted to establish reliability. Data from the pilot were analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha reliability test, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.81, confirming the internal consistency of the instrument. The researchers personally administered the instrument to ensure clarity of instructions and a high response rate. Completed questionnaires were screened, coded, and analyzed using Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA) a multivariate technique suitable for exploring the linear relationships between two sets of variables (soft skills and academic resilience components).

Before conducting the CCA, the following assumptions were checked: Multivariate normality, Linearity and Multicollinearity. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the principals of participating schools. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose and confidentiality of the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Results

Research Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant relationship between soft skills variables and components of academic resilience among secondary school students.

Table 1

Canonical Correlation between Soft Skills Variables and Academic Resilience Components Among Secondary School Students

Canonical Root	Eigen Values	Canonical Correlation	R^2	F	P	df	Wilks Statistics
1	.403	.53	.28	23.48	.00	16.0	.70
2	.005	.07	.01	.71	.69	9.0	.99
VARIABLES		CANONICAL VARIATES					
		I			II		
Academic Confidence		-.03			-.50		
Academic Control		-.46			-.31		
Academic Composure		-.98			.02		
Academic Commitment		-.17			-.17		
Communication Skill		-.64			-.35		
Problem Solving Skill		-.72			-.50		
Critical Thinking Skill		-.71			.57		
Time Management Skill		-.84			.37		

Table 1 presents the canonical correlation results between soft skills variables and academic resilience components among secondary school students. The first canonical function produced an eigenvalue of 0.403 and a canonical correlation of 0.53, which was statistically significant ($F = 23.48, p < 0.05$). This indicates a meaningful relationship between the two variable sets. The squared canonical correlation ($R^2 = 0.28$) shows that approximately 28 percent of the variance in students' academic resilience is explained by their soft skills. The Wilks' Lambda value of 0.70 (significant at p = .00 <.05) further confirms that the canonical relationship between the two domains is statistically valid. The second canonical function (eigenvalue = 0.005, canonical correlation = 0.07) was not significant (p = .69 >.05), suggesting that only the first canonical root meaningfully explains the shared variance between the two constructs. Therefore, Figure 1 focuses on the first canonical function, which depicts the structural model of the relationships among the soft skills and academic resilience variables.

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University of the Gambia supported edition
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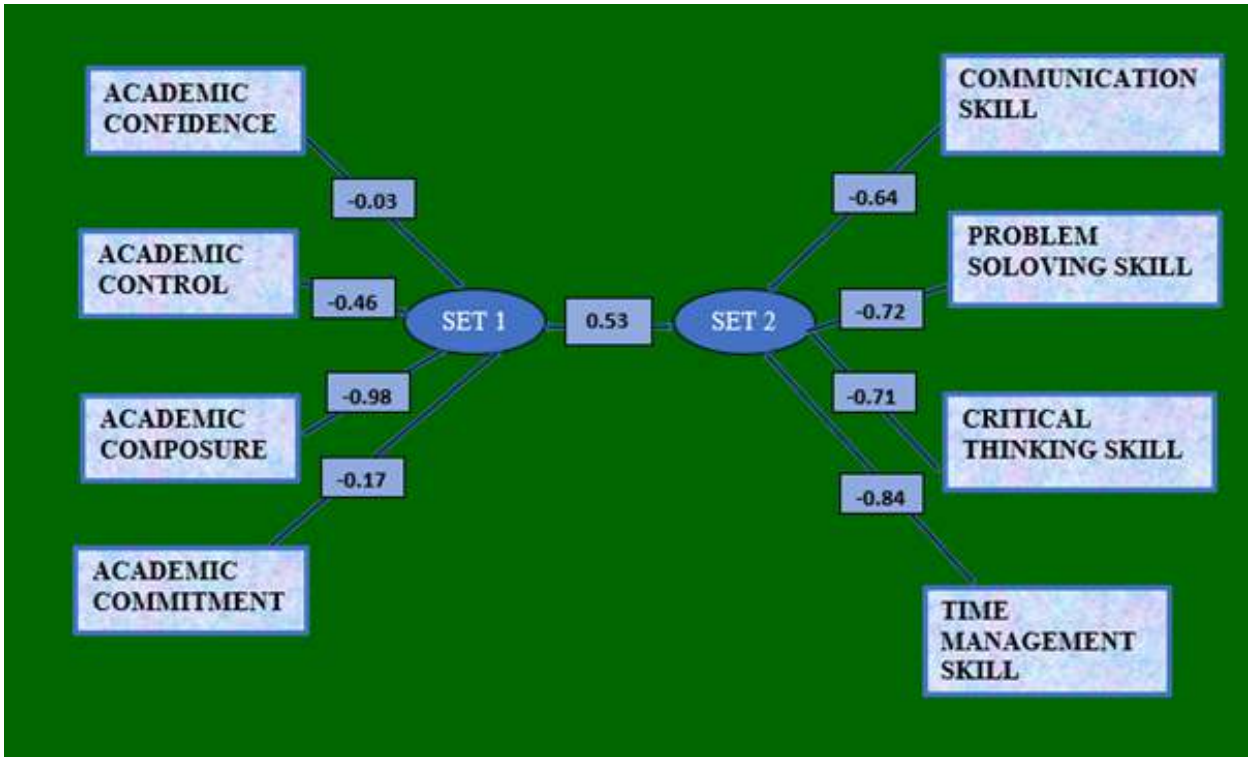
AJB-SDR Vol. 7, No 1, 2025

Figure 1

The Structural Coefficients of the 1st Canonical Function and the Canonical Correlation Value Between Soft Skills Components and Academic Resilience.



For the first canonical function, all of the soft skills variables showed negative canonical loadings indicating an inverse relationship with their own canonical variate. Among the soft skills variables, time management skill (-0.84) was the strongest contributor among soft skills, followed by problem-solving skill (–0.72) and critical thinking skill (–0.71). Communication skill (–0.64) made the least contribution within the soft skills set. On the academic resilience side, academic composure (–0.98) had the highest loading, suggesting that students who manage their emotions and stress effectively tend to show greater alignment with the resilience construct. Academic control (–0.46) showed moderate contribution, while academic commitment (–0.17) and academic confidence (–0.03) had relatively weaker associations. The canonical correlation of 0.53 signifies a moderate to strong multivariate relationship between soft skills and academic resilience. The effect size (28 percent shared variance) is not trivial from an educational standpoint. It implies that nearly one-third of students' resilience in coping with academic demands can be attributed to the quality of their soft skills particularly time management, problem-solving, and critical thinking. This highlights the educational importance of nurturing soft skills as integral components of resilience training.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed a statistically significant linear relationship between soft skill variables and academic resilience components among students in Akwa Ibom State. This indicates that the development of soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and time management contributes meaningfully to students' capacity to cope with academic challenges, recover from setbacks, and maintain focus on their learning goals. The canonical correlation (r = .53) and the shared variance ($R^2 = 0.28$) suggest that approximately 28% of students' academic resilience can be explained by their level of soft skills, demonstrating a moderate-to-substantial effect size in educational research terms.

From a practical standpoint, this proportion is meaningful because it underscores that nearly one-third of the variance in students' ability to persist and adapt academically is attributable to non-cognitive skill development rather than traditional academic instruction alone. This

finding has significant implications for both teaching practice and educational policy. It suggests that while cognitive instruction remains crucial, resilience-building in students cannot be fully achieved without deliberate attention to soft skill enhancement. Therefore, school curricula that integrate structured training in communication, problem-solving, and time management can potentially foster both academic competence and emotional adaptability among learners.

The result corroborates the findings of Shajimon and Suma (2018), who demonstrated that students with strong soft skills achieved higher levels of academic adjustment and persistence in learning environments. Likewise, Obilor (2019) found that interpersonal and self-management skills predict students' ability to navigate academic pressures effectively, leading to improved motivation and reduced anxiety. These studies collectively support the present finding that soft skills are integral to students' psychological strength and sustained academic effort.

Further alignment is found in Lippman et al. (2015), who established that soft skills such as perseverance, problem-solving, and communication serve as resilience-protective factors that help students confront adversity in learning contexts. Masten (2014) also emphasized that resilience emerges from a combination of emotional regulation and problem-solving ability two outcomes commonly associated with soft skill acquisition. Thus, students who can manage time efficiently, think critically, and communicate effectively are more likely to remain composed, confident, and committed when confronted with academic stressors.

Beyond empirical alignment, the finding highlights a critical educational insight: soft skills serve as both cognitive enhancers and emotional stabilizers. Their contribution to resilience implies that schools must move beyond knowledge transmission to focus on holistic learner development. In practical terms, integrating soft skill training into the curriculum through cooperative learning, peer mentorship, or project-based assessments could strengthen students' self-regulation, emotional balance, and long-term academic engagement. This result calls for a curriculum reform that embeds non-cognitive competencies as assessable learning outcomes within the Nigerian secondary education framework. Education administrators and curriculum planners should recognize that resilience can be intentionally cultivated through soft skill-oriented pedagogies.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between academic resilience and soft skills among secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The findings indicated statistically significant linear correlations between soft skill indicators and academic resilience factors, which are confidence, self-control, composure, and commitment. It implies that the students with high soft skills are more apt to show resilient academic achievement, which enables them to proceed despite adversity, manage emotions, and maintain focus on scholarly endeavors. The finding underscores the imperative to add soft skills training to the secondary school curriculum to improve resiliency and overall learning and well-being among students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations have been formulated:

1. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with curriculum developers and educational boards, should embed structured soft skill modules into existing subjects. This can be achieved through infused curriculum approaches, where soft skills are taught within subjects like English, Civic Education, and Social Studies.
2. Schools should introduce student-focused initiatives such as peer mentoring, leadership clubs, and problem-solving competitions. These programs should be designed to enhance students' self-confidence, composure, and commitment which are core components of academic resilience.

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ISSN: 2714-2965 (Print)
ISSN: 2714-3449 (Online)
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The African Journal of Behavioural and Scale Development Research
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