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# Resilience and perceived self-efficacy in life skills from early to late adolescence

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## ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at verifying the relation between factors of resilience and perceived self-efficacy in life skills, considering a sample of 302 Italian early, middle, and late adolescents, recruited from State Junior and High Schools of the Eastern Sicily, Italy. We used the Perceived Self-efficacy in Life Skills Scales (PSES\_PE/NE: Empathic Self-efficacy Scale; PSES\_PS: Problem-solving Self-efficacy Scale) and the Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (Italian-RASP) composed of five factors (sense of humour, competence, adaptability, engagement, and control). Results demonstrated that the factors of resilience were strongly (adaptability and engagement) and moderately (sense of humour and competence) related to perceived self-efficacy in the analysed domains; consequently, adolescents who perceived themselves as highly efficient in empathy and in problem-solving were more resilient than those who perceived themselves as lowly efficient in the same domains. Future research should investigate these relations in other life skills expressed by children and adults.

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Self-efficacy; problem-solving; life skills; resilience; Italian adolescents

## Introduction

The relationship between psychological resilience and self-efficacy in adolescence has been considered one of the most important topics of positive adjustment of developmental age (Bandura, 1986; Wagnild, 2009; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Pooley & Cohen, 2010; Sagone & De Caroli, 2013a, 2013b; Schwarzer & Warner, 2013; Sagone & De Caroli, 2016; Sagone & Indiana, 2017). This relationship suggested to assess the role played by the perceived self-efficacy in life skills related to resilient resources, defined as the ability to overcome hardships and flourish in the face of them (Ryff & Singer, 2003), to surface in the face of hardship (Hawley, 2000), and the ability of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual family, community, and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2005). More recently, according to Hurtes and Allen's approach (Hurtes & Allen, 2001) and revised model of resilience by De Caroli and Sagone (), highly resilient individuals considered as those individuals who are able to handle a set of characteristics permitting them to reach a psychological well-being status, trying to figure out things they don't understand (engagement), to deal with the consequences of their actions and can change their behaviours to match them with the situation (adaptability), tend to avoid situations where they could get into trouble and learn from their mistakes (control), are likely to know when they are good at something (competence), and tend to look for the 'brighter side' of tough situations and to manage stress with a sense of humour (sense of humour). These elements are positively related to

one's perception of self-efficacy, conceptualized by Bandura (2007) in terms of perceived operative ability. Self-efficacy has been defined as the belief in what one can do with whatever resources one can muster; individuals are asked to rate the strength of the assurance they can execute given activities under specific demands.

As studied by Pooley and Cohen (2010), general self-efficacy significantly predicted high levels of resilience in middle adolescents (valued by the Adolescent Resilience Scale; Hjemdal et al., 2006), together with social support and sense of belonging (measured by the Psychological Sense of School Membership; Goodenow, 1993). Also in Italian school-context, Sagone and De Caroli (2013a) discovered that adolescents with high levels of resilience perceived themselves as more efficient in general (and, specifically, in scholastic context) than those with low levels of resilience. Furthermore, more recently, the same authors found that early adolescents highly self-efficient in problem-solving, scholastic performances, and empathy were more resilient than lowly self-efficient ones (Sagone & De Caroli, 2016).

The current study is part of a large project developed by the authors from 2013 to present. It mainly focused on the analysis of life skills in life span, considering that these abilities are important protective factors for avoiding or reducing the risk of maladaptive behaviours during this development period (see Sagone & Indiana, 2017). The empathic and problem-solving self-efficacy represented the main dimensions of the so-called 'life skills': these abilities were defined as 'abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal efficiently with the demands and challenges of everyday life'. For this reason, life skills training from childhood to adolescence facilitates the increase of self-efficacy and of other psychological dimensions in different areas of everyday life. In detail, life skills are considered as psychosocial and interpersonal competencies that help individuals in making informed decisions (decision-making), solving problems (problem-solving), thinking critically and creatively (critical and creative thinking), communicating efficiently (efficacy communication), building healthy relationships (interpersonal relationships), get involved with the others (empathy), knowing themselves, recognizing feelings and discriminating between them (self-awareness), and, finally, managing emotions and stress. Specifically, the perceived self-efficacy linked to specific life skills analysed in the current study is referred to the individual's ability to perceive another person's feelings and need for emotional support, to experience emotions from another person's perspective, and to be sensitive to how one's actions affect others' feelings (that is, empathic self-efficacy) and to the ability to solve and cope with difficulties in a creative and innovative way (that is, self-efficacy in problem-solving) (Bandura et al., 2003; Capanna & Steca, 2006; Di Giunta et al., 2010; Grazzani et al., 2015). In a previous research, De Caroli and Sagone (2014a) analysed the relations between self-efficacy and psychological well-being in highly versus lowly self-efficient Italian adolescents, applying the Generalized Self-efficacy Scale (GSES: Sabilia, Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) and the Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBs: Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Zani & Cicognani, 1999). The authors found positive relations between generalized self-efficacy and psychological well-being, especially with mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance. More recently, Sagone and De Caroli (2015) explored the relation among dispositional optimism (LoT-R: Scheier & Carver, 1992), life satisfaction (LLS: Diener et al., 2010), and generalized self-efficacy beliefs (GSES: Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) with resilience in early, middle, and late adolescents. Results showed that (a) highly optimist adolescents reported a more resilient profile than lowly optimist ones; (b) highly satisfied and self-efficient adolescents showed a more resilient profile than lowly satisfied and self-efficient ones, (c) the more the adolescents were optimist, the more they considered themselves as highly self-efficient and satisfied with their life; and (d) the more the adolescents were satisfied with their life, the more they valued themselves as highly self-efficient in various circumstances.

Considering the last recent research about the differences among affective profiles in dimensions of resilience and factors of psychological well-being (De Caroli & Sagone, ), the same authors found that middle and late adolescents with a self-fulfilling profile (high positive affect and low negative affect using the PANAS: Di Fabio & Bucci, 2015) reported higher resilience (in detail, sense of humour,

competence, adaptability, and engagement) and psychological well-being in autonomy, purpose in life, self-acceptance than the others. Finally, the connections of positive affect with dimensions of resilience and perceived self-efficacy in life skills in adolescence have been investigated more recently by Sagone and Indiana (2017), applying the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), the Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (RASP), and the Perceived Self-Efficacy Scales in Life Skills. The authors found that adolescents with high positive affect reported higher levels of perceived self-efficacy in life skills than those with low positive affect, as well as adolescents with high positive affect reached higher levels of resilience (specifically, adaptability, and engagement) than those with low positive affect. As reported by Sagone and Indiana (2017), given the relation of positive affect with dimensions of resilience and perceived self-efficacy in life skills, future investigations could better understand the functioning of protective factors actively engaged in facing up to the transition from childhood to adolescence and this topic could be in line with the flourishing approach in supporting the promotion of psychological well-being and the increase of individual's bio-psycho-social skills.

### **Purpose of study**

The main purpose of this cross-sectional research is to analyse the relations between factors of resilience and two types of perceived self-efficacy, controlling the differences for gender and age groups. Studying the connection between psychological resilience and self-efficacy beliefs reported in more recent literature, a narrow number of findings showed that the more the individuals reported high levels of resilience, the more they perceived themselves as highly efficient (Pajares, 1996; Keye & Pidgeon, 2013; Sagone & De Caroli, 2013a) and vice versa (Hamill, 2003). The choice of these two types of self-efficacy has been addressed by previous studies carried out in Italian school-context that demonstrated the predominant influence of these life skills in adolescence. In relation to previous findings (see Hamill, 2003; Schwarzer & Warner, 2013; Sagone & De Caroli, 2013a), we hypothesized that: H1) adolescents who will perceive themselves as highly efficient in problem-solving will be more resilient than those who will perceive themselves as lowly efficient; H2) adolescents who will perceive themselves as highly efficient in empathy will be more resilient than those who will perceive themselves as lowly efficient in this domain.

Differences for gender and age groups in each of the above-mentioned constructs will be examined, comparing them with the previous findings in Italian school-context.

This research will provide a relevant and further contribution to the analysis of resilience and self-efficacy in life skills adopting an age cross-sectional approach.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 302 Italian early, middle, and late healthy adolescents, divided into 128 boys and 174 girls and randomly recruited from three State Junior and High Schools sited in Catania, Syracuse, and Ragusa, Eastern Sicily (Italy). Their age range was from 11 to 19 years, grouped in almost balanced three groups. The early group was composed by 104 adolescents, 46 boys and 58 girls ( $M = 11,5$ ,  $SD = .50$ ), the middle group was constituted by 87 adolescents, 32 boys and 55 girls ( $M = 14,2$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ), and the late group consisted of 111, 50 boys and 61 girls ( $M = 17,7$ ,  $SD = .72$ ). Written parental consent for the underage adolescents' participation to this study was requested and obtained according to the requirements of privacy and anonymity laid down by Italian Law (Law Decree DL. 196/2003). All measures have been administered in a classroom setting by an expert researcher during the time of schooling.

### **Perceived self-efficacy scales in life skills**

The Self-Efficacy Scales in Life Skills were composed by four subscales (see Caprara, 2001 for PSES\_PE; PSES\_NE; PSES\_PS; PSES\_IC/SC), respectively, used to analyse (1–2) the ability to efficiently regulate

and manage the expression of positive (PSES\_PE) and negative emotions (PSES\_NE); (3) the ability to efficiently communicate in interpersonal and social relations (PSES\_IC/SC); and (4) the ability to respond in problem-solving situations in an efficient way (PSES\_PS). For this study, we used only two scales of the original form, the Perceived Empathic Self-efficacy Scale (PSES\_PE/NE with 15 items) and the Perceived Problem-solving Self-efficacy Scale (PSES\_PS with 14 items); each statement was evaluable on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (equal to not at all efficient) to 7 intervals (equal to completely efficient). For PSES\_PE/NE, e.g. 'How well can you experience how a person in trouble feels?' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ) and for PSES\_PS, e.g. 'How well can you find new solutions to problems?' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Resiliency attitude and skills profile

The Italian version of Resiliency Attitudes and Skills Profile (RASP: De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b) was a self-report questionnaire with 30 statements, judged on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (corresponding to strongly disagree) to 6 intervals (corresponding to strongly agree) and grouped into five dimensions typically associated to resilient people: sense of humour ( $\alpha = .69$ ; e.g. 'Laughter helps me deal with stress'), competence ( $\alpha = .65$ ; e.g. 'I know when I am good at something'), adaptability ( $\alpha = .75$ ; e.g. 'I can change my behaviour to match the situation'), engagement ( $\alpha = .82$ ; e.g. 'I try to figure out things I do not understand'), and control ( $\alpha = .78$ ; e.g., 'I avoid situations where I could get into trouble').

### Results

Statistical data analyses were carried out through the IBM SPSS 20, using *t*-tests and ANOVA to analyse the differences for gender and age groups, and Pearson's linear correlations and linear regressions to measure the associations between self-efficacy and factors of resilience. Gender and age groups of participants were used as independent variables, while mean scores obtained on each self-efficacy measures and factors of resilience were used as dependent variables.

We reported descriptive analyses of RASP-scores: RASP-engagement ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = .64$ ), RASP-competence ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = .78$ ), RASP-control ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = .85$ ), RASP-sense of humour ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ), and RASP-adaptability ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). Without reference to the differences for gender and age groups, adolescents reached high scores of RASP-engagement and RASP-competence, average scores of RASP-control and RASP-sense of humour, and low scores of RASP-adaptability. Significant effects of age groups and gender only for RASP-competence ( $F = 8.349$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (Table 1) and RASP-sense of humour ( $t = 2.275$ ,  $p = .02$ ) (Table 2) were noted. These last results indicated that late adolescents expressed higher competence than early and middle ones, confirming with Bonferroni's post hoc analysis ( $p < .001$ ) an increasing trend from early to late adolescents. Furthermore, boys showed a more sense of humour than girls in facing daily adversities. No interaction effect between the two independent variables was observed.

**Table 1.** Italian RASP dimensions and self-efficacy: differences for age groups.

Dimensions	Early		Middle		Late	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
RASP-Sense of humour	4.55	.94	4.57	1.21	4.52	1.04
RASP-Competence**	4.52	.81	4.77	.83	4.94	.65
RASP-Adaptability	4.23	.76	4.33	.75	4.33	.68
RASP-Control	4.49	.87	4.46	.95	4.67	.75
RASP-Engagement	4.78	.75	4.85	.59	4.80	.59
PSES_PE/NE: self-efficacy in empathy	47.76	6.19	48.85	8.50	49.42	7.59
PSES_PS: self-efficacy in problem-solving	68.17	11.58	69.45	12.51	70.86	10.03

\*\*Significant differences were observed for  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Italian RASP dimensions and self-efficacy: differences for sex.

Dimensions	Boys		Girls	
	M	SD	M	SD
RASP-Sense of humour*	4.71	.94	4.43	1.13
RASP-Competence	4.76	.78	4.73	.78
RASP-Adaptability	4.33	.70	4.27	.75
RASP-Control	4.59	.80	4.51	.89
RASP-Engagement	4.73	.62	4.86	.66
PSES_PE/NE: self-efficacy in empathy	48.80	7.42	48.60	7.46
PSES_PS: self-efficacy in problem-solving	69.89	11.12	69.27	11.54

\*Significant differences were observed for  $p < .05$ .

Concerning self-efficacy in life skills, descriptive analyses indicated that adolescents scored higher in perceived self-efficacy in problem-solving (PSES\_PS:  $M = 69.53$ ,  $SD = 11.34$ ) than in self-efficacy in empathy (PSES\_PE/NE:  $M = 48.68$ ,  $SD = 7.43$ ), without significant differences for age groups and gender.

### Correlation analyses between self-efficacy and factors of resilience

Correlation analyses were computed between the two measures of self-efficacy and factors of resilience, noticing that all factors of resilience were linked to self-efficacy:

- (1) RASP-sense of humour was moderately correlated both with self-efficacy in problem-solving ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in empathy ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- (2) RASP-competence was moderately correlated with self-efficacy in problem-solving ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but weakly with empathic self-efficacy ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- (3) RASP-control was weakly correlated both with self-efficacy in problem-solving ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and empathic self-efficacy ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- (4) RASP-engagement was strongly correlated both with self-efficacy in problem-solving ( $r = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and empathic self-efficacy ( $r = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ );
- (5) RASP-adaptability was strongly correlated both with self-efficacy in problem-solving ( $r = .53$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and empathic self-efficacy ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To verify the influence of perceived self-efficacy on the factors of resilience, we carried out linear regressions using the factors of resilience as dependent variables and the two types of self-efficacy as independent variables. As shown in Table 3, self-efficacy in problem-solving positively but scarcely predicted the dimension of RASP-control ( $R = .282$ ,  $R^2 = .080$ ,  $F = 12.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ); self-efficacy in problem-solving and empathy positively predicted the RASP-adaptability ( $R = .578$ ,  $R^2 = .334$ ,  $F = 74.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ); self-efficacy in problem-solving and empathy positively predicted the RASP-engagement ( $R = .564$ ,  $R^2 = .318$ ,  $F = 69.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ); moreover, self-efficacy in problem-solving positively predicted the RASP-competence ( $R = .387$ ,  $R^2 = .150$ ,  $F = 26.034$ ,  $p < .001$ ); moreover, self-efficacy in problem-solving and empathy positively predicted the RASP-sense of humour ( $R = .399$ ,  $R^2 = .160$ ,  $F = 28.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 3.** Linear regressions between self-efficacy in life skills and resilience.

PSES	RASP	Beta	t	p-Value
Empathic self-efficacy	Control	.108	1.58	.114
Problem-solving self-efficacy		.204	2.99	.003
Empathic self-efficacy	Adaptability	.292	5.01	.000
Problem-solving self-efficacy		.356	6.12	.000
Empathic self-efficacy	Engagement	.289	4.90	.000
Problem-solving self-efficacy		.343	5.83	.000
Empathic self-efficacy	Competence	.113	1.71	.087
Problem-solving self-efficacy		.310	4.71	.000
Empathic self-efficacy	Sense of humour	.253	3.86	.000
Problem-solving self-efficacy		.195	2.98	.003

## Conclusion and future direction

The evidence of this further study carried out in Italian context about the relation between self-efficacy in life skills and resilient resources confirmed that, according to the revised model of resilience (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b), highly efficient adolescents perceived themselves as highly able to try to figure out things they don't understand (engagement) and likely to deal with the consequences of their actions and to change their behaviours for matching them with the situation (adaptability); moreover, highly efficient adolescents perceived themselves as moderately able to know when they are good at something (competence), even if considered themselves as scarcely able to look for the 'brighter side' of tough situations and to manage stress with humour (sense of humour) and to avoid situations where they could get into trouble and learn from their mistakes (control). Differences for age groups and gender were scarcely noteworthy, revealing a reduced definition of their effect on the dimensions of resilience and self-efficacy in this sample: it was observed an increasing trend from early to late adolescents in terms of competence, and a major use of humour by boys in the management of external circumstances than girls. The age differences were in line with the findings from the Italian sample of De Caroli and Sagone's analysis of resilience (De Caroli & Sagone, 2014b), according to which adolescents improved their resilient abilities in front of adversities (that is, competence, engagement, control, and adaptability) with their growth. Furthermore, the observed gender differences related to the humour style as a resilient resource confirmed that boys perceived themselves as more humoristic than girls, as reported in the Sagone and De Caroli's contemporary studies (Sagone & De Caroli, 2015, 2016).

As predicted by initial hypotheses (H1 and H2), results demonstrated that the more the adolescents were highly self-efficient in problem-solving and in managing the expression of positive and negative emotions, the more they were resilient. These data were confirmed by linear regression analyses, revealing the influence of self-efficacy on the factors of resilience, adaptability, and competence.

This project corroborated the importance of perceived self-efficacy in life skills on the ability to overcome the adversities and to manage the 'at-risk' situations in scholastic and real-life context; these life skills are the main competencies to learn during the developmental age from childhood to adulthood to mark the positive growth of each individual and to reduce the 'emotional vulnerability' of human beings.

Nevertheless, this project has several limits that require caution interpreting the results, even if these are in line with previous findings in the same context. First, the size of sample demands an increased number of participants to generalize the results to a larger population of adolescents. Second, the missing data from different socio-cultural environments and socio-economic status of involved adolescents exclude comparisons among participants living in North and Centre of Italy. These adolescents were only recruited by cities in the South of Italy. In the next deepening of these findings, researchers will involve large samples of adolescents from other cities of Italy to highlight socio-cultural differences in life skills and, subsequently, in the promotion of resilience. Third, the measures for analysing resilience (RASP) and self-efficacy (PSES) adopted mean scores typically reported according to the quantitative approach; it will be useful to add storytelling or life book techniques in line with a qualitative and subjective approach.

Future research direction should be oriented towards the strengthening of life skills by means of specific educational trainings. Based on the narrative approach (using storytelling, life books, and metaphors), these educational trainings could develop resilience and self-efficacy in life skills both at school-context and everyday life. From the recent literature, it is possible to understand that these trainings often help to improve the quality of life of children, adolescents, and young adults (e.g. Esmaeilinasab et al., 2011; Hajia et al., 2011; Nabors et al., 2000; Srikala & Kumar, 2010) also with deficit, diseases, or social disadvantages (e.g. Hatami et al., 2016; Kazemi et al., 2014; Shakeri et al., 2015; Sobhi-Gharamaleki & Rajabi, 2010). For example, Kazemi et al. (2014) found that the experimental group of primary school children with dyscalculia had a significant increase in the self-esteem



and communication skills than the control group. Nabors et al. (2000) found out that training of life skills decreased aggression and depression and increased self-confidence skills and responsibility in high school students. Sobhi-Gharamaleki and Rajabi (2010) found that life skills training affected the decreasing of mental disorders symptoms (especially anxiety, depression, and stress) expressed by university students suspected of mental disorders. Moreover, Hajia et al. (2011) verified that the life skills training increased happiness, emotion regulation, psychological health, and social relationships in the experimental group of university students, compared to the control group. More recently, Hatami et al. (2016) found that orphaned adolescents scored higher in self-efficacy and self-awareness skills after the intervention focused on life skills training than a control group. Only few evidences demonstrated that these life skills trainings not always are useful (or partially useful) to increase the social and life skills (e.g. Babakhani, 2011; Rezayat & Nayeri, 2013). Likewise, Sagone, De Caroli, Indiana, & Fichera (2018) found that, after the life skills training about self-image and socio-relational competences, preadolescents enhanced their self-efficacy only in the managing of negative emotions and some factors of psychological well-being. We will address future investigations towards the improvement of psychological well-being, resilient resources, optimism, coping strategies, and assertiveness in children and adolescents with disability (sensorial, intellectual, or behavioural disability) or social disadvantages through the life skills training performed in school context, defining the array of activities useful to refine on the quality of life of each student.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Elisabetta Sagone** is Senior Researcher in Developmental and Educational Psychology; her main areas of study concern resilience, psychological well-being and self-efficacy in life skills in developmental age, divergent thinking in typical and atypically developed children, coping in parents of disabled children, and representations of Parental Self, motherhood, and fatherhood in life span.

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**Rossella Falanga** is Ph.D. in Educational Sciences and her scientific interests are divergent abilities in life span and metaphorical creativity, values, ethnic prejudice and stereotypical attitudes, prosocial-moral development, and hope.

**Maria Luisa Indiana** is Ph.D. in Psychology and her scientific interests of research are focused on positive psychology, resilience, well-being of typically and atypically developed children and adolescents, coping strategies, and perceived self-efficacy in life skills in developmental age.

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