

“LOSE AT THE STARTING LINE, WIN AT THE FINISHING LINE”: BEATING ACADEMIC ADVERSITY

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This paper examines public perception and discourse of academic adversity and resilience to understand what are considered to be deterrents of academic success and what are believed to effectively counteract the deterrents and contribute to educational resilience. Data are drawn on discourse analysis of media coverage in Hong Kong of the success stories of students at risk after the release of university entrance exam results.

In Hong Kong, educational desires are fuelled by the high value placed on education, and an extremely competitive examination system whereby less than 20 percent of secondary students are admitted to university degree programs. As in many Asian cities, Hong Kong uses a centralized and uniform public examination as the only criterion of university entrance screening, reinforcing an examination-dominated culture. Success in public examination is equated with success in intellectual advancement or even in life. Underprivileged students are often described to be “losing at the starting line,” implying that they are doomed to failure right at the start. Those who overcome academic adversity are upheld as exemplary students. Every year after the announcement of the public examination results, success stories of students who have beaten the odds occupy significant coverage of news for days. By analyzing how the stories of failure, success, and resilience are told, this paper explores factors contributing to success under adverse conditions, as understood by students, and the society at large. It discusses how educational resilience experiences are represented in mass media, what are considered to be essential elements of academic success within the context of adversity, and the perceived role of significant others especially family members in contributing to academic resilience. This project seeks to illuminate the interplay between different factors in shaping resilience and in contributing to positive educational outcomes.