

Uncovering Hidden Strengths in Adolescents with High ACEs: A Piloting Test of the Specialization Hypothesis

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Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are often linked to deficits in cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional development in children and adolescents (Webster, 2022). Students in special education with a focus on emotional and social development (EBD) are particularly exposed to a high number of ACEs (Asselman et al., 2025). However, recent concepts - such as the specialization hypothesis from the Hidden Talents framework (Ellis et al., 2017) - highlight that these children may develop specific strengths as adaptive responses to stress-filled environments. Such hidden strengths, including advanced emotional regulation, could be fostered in schools to support affected students in learning and development (Ellis et al., 2022).

This study investigates

- a) how ACEs relate to psychosocial development and emotional self-regulation, and
- b) whether the specialization hypothesis can be confirmed, suggesting that higher ACE exposure is associated with better emotional regulation.

We conducted an online survey with N = 301 adolescents aged 12-19 years. ACEs were measured using the Child and Adolescent Trauma Screen (CATS; Sachser et al., 2022), psychosocial outcomes with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), and emotional regulation with the Affective Style Questionnaire (Graser et al., 2019).

Preliminary findings will be presented and discussed in light of their relevance for special education and inclusive learning environments (EBD), emphasizing the potential to identify and nurture resilience-based strengths in students with high levels of adversity.

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