

Primary School Teachers' Resilience: Experiences and Perceptions¹

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The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' viewpoints and conceptualizations of resilience and to explore their experiences of resilience. This is a qualitative study that uses a focus group and individual interviews. Participants were teachers who work at a primary school that has multiple risk factors, such as being at a low socioeconomic status, being in a challenging area, having disadvantaged students, and having insufficient physical facilities. A semi-structured interview form was employed in the data collection process and inductive content analysis was used in the analysis of data. According to the findings, participants defined resilience as an individual, operational, and conceptual personality trait. They described themselves as resilient and stated their resilience levels have changed over time. It was also concluded that they encountered various risk factors and had some protective factors. Their suggestions were for the educational system, teachers, administrators, and parents to foster teacher resilience. Implications for future practice and research were discussed.

Keywords: Primary school teachers, risk and protective factors, teacher experiences, teacher resilience

Introduction

Interest in a better understanding of emotional health and teachers' resilience is increasingly important as it helps to improve the quality of education (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Research examining teacher resilience has also sprung up over the past 15 years (Mansfield, 2021), and the construct of resilience has been examined from multiple perspectives using a variety of methodologies (Beltman & Mansfield, 2018). Studies on teacher resilience emerge with a focus on the affective properties of teachers (Hargreaves, 1998; Zembylas, 2003) and the need for constant changes in teachers' coping skills (Le Cornu, 2009). Considering the unfavorable incidents that teachers may face in schools, minimizing these negativities can make them feel good and fulfill their professions better. To this end, it is necessary to focus on the affirmative aspects of their professional lives and define the components that increase their motivation, commitment, and effectiveness (Day, 2008). The principal provision for coping with problems and adapting to life more quickly is being resilient (Masten, 2001). Understanding resilience requires uncovering and defining the roles of all elements of a good fit, even in adverse situations (Masten, 1994; 2021). Therefore, examining personal, familial, and external protective factors in resilience research

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may explain the reasons some people at risk are more successful in coping and accommodating than others (Gizir, 2007; Masten & Reed, 2002).

Teacher resilience as the qualification to stand against the stressors and setbacks in teaching is crucial in all educational arenas, in that it can generate favorable outcomes. Given that teaching does present challenges, this research points to resilience as a critical role for teachers who achieve promising results in education, and it is expected to produce in-depth descriptions of resilience from teachers' outlooks and experiences. Thus, the study may contribute to expand their awareness of resilience and their rapid recovery in the face of problems. Researchers have examined strategies for promoting resilience in teachers for many years and have made significant efforts with an international perspective; however, studies conducted in the United States of America, Australia, and in the United Kingdom have dominated the knowledge base (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). This study that was conducted with Turkish primary school teachers can reflect an international outlook and help channel future research in the field of teacher resilience both in Turkey and other countries.

The present study aims to investigate Turkish primary school teachers' perspectives and conceptualizations of resilience and to explore how they experience resilience. For this purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

How do participants define resilience?

What are the participants' self-assessments about resilience characteristics and their changes over time?

How do participants describe the risk factors they face and the protective factors they have?

What are the participants' suggestions to foster teacher resilience?

Conceptual Framework

Resilience

Global threats from natural disasters, epidemics, political conflict, and the hurdles of climate change appear to be motivating intense interest in resilience across many sectors and sciences concerned with human welfare (Masten, 2021). Resilience is the capacity to withstand and rebound from adversity (Wolin & Wolin, 1993) and the ability to adjust successfully despite challenging or threatening cases (Masten, 2014; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). According to Masten (1994) and Garmezy (1991), resilient people have three underlying profiles: getting better results than expected despite hardships and deprivation, rolling with the punches, and surviving trauma. They differ from others in their self-awareness, social competence, good communication, empathy, hopefulness about the future, autonomy, problem-solving skills, seeing issues as opportunities, and willingness to take risks (Krowetz, 2008; Werner & Smith, 1992). They rarely give up on stressful events, recover themselves quickly, and emerge stronger from troubles and risks (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Resilience emphasizes the positive attributes and potentials rather than the negative aspects (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Studies on resilience argue that

resilience is an innate human capacity that can be learned and enhanced (Beltman, Mansfield, & Harris, 2015; Doney, 2012; Griffiths, 2014; LeCornu, 2013). In some research, resilience has been defined as an everyday phenomenon that can be learned in coping with stress, difficulties, and risks (Gu & Day, 2013; Taormina, 2015). Resilience is a multidimensional concept that includes social structure and skills, such as good interpersonal relationships, communication, and coping (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006). Ungar (2004, p. 352) defines resilience as the outcome of the interaction between individuals and their surroundings to qualify themselves as healthy under adverse conditions. Considering that the resilience of individuals is affected by the environmental context, the social ecological approach guided in this study. The social ecological approach pioneered by Bronfenbrenner (1979) examines the positive effects of individual, familial and social protective factors. Fostering positive environments in families, schools, and communities can neutralize risks in life.

Teacher Resilience

Teacher resilience means not only the capacity to overcome obstacles but also having the features to encourage students to succeed, such as professional self-efficacy and motivation (Day & Gu, 2014). It is the potential of teachers to use their professional skills effectively to achieve the goals of the school (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004), maintain their commitment to teaching (Brunetti, 2006), and develop their social, academic, and professional competence (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). Resilient teachers have characteristics such as being optimistic, adapting to difficulties, flexibility, having reinforcers and problem-solving skills, planning, asking for help, acting independently, having goals, determination, and taking risks (Tait, 2008). Teachers with a high level of resilience are more successful in meeting the various demands of students and focusing on their students' strengths rather than their weaknesses, and they cope more easily with the stress they are exposed to during the teaching process (Knight, 2007).

Studies on resilience were initially conducted with teachers who left their professions in the first three or five years (Le Cornu, 2009). However, some researchers (Bobek, 2002; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004) have stated that resilience is necessary not only for new teachers but also for all teachers to boost their professional satisfaction, effectiveness, and better reconstruction to alterations. Gu and Day (2007) emphasized that teacher resilience is significant for three reasons. First, as Henderson and Milstein (2003) stated, it is not realistic to expect students to be resilient if teachers do not show resilience. Resilience also improves the line of vision to maintain motivation and commitment. In addition, resilience has a major role in strengthening teachers' qualifications, such as professional commitment, motivation, and self-efficacy, which are necessary for their success in the profession.

Risk and Protective Factors

Mental blocks and risk factors can make it difficult to settle into stressful events (Masten, 1994). Risk factors are distressing circumstances that increase the possibility of an unfavorable position (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990; Richman & Fraser, 2001), obscurities in the life, and agents that prevent a harmonious survival (Morales, 2008). Fleming, Mackrain, and LeBuffe (2013) argue that teachers' exposure to stress may derogate their productivity and interest, interactions with students, and professional skills to display role model behaviors. Low self-esteem and self-confidence, lack of support and heavy workload, difficulty in seeking help, incompatibility of self-beliefs and behaviors, lack of time, low motivated students, inadequate working conditions, nonsustaining relationships with management and colleagues, lack of educational tasks and meetings, and domestic violence and restrictions at home are risk factors in various studies for teachers (Beltman, 2021; Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & MacKay 2012; Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Day, 2008; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Fleet, Kitson, Cassady, & Hughes, 2007; Flores, 2006; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Jenkins, Smith, & Maxwell, 2009; Kitching, Morgan, & O'Leary, 2009; Kyriacou, 2001; McCormack & Gore, 2008; Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

Masten and Wright (2010) suggest that resilience should emphasize protective factors to minimize the maleffects of risk factors. Protective factors are defined as aspects that reduce or eliminate the adverse impact of risks in stressful or challenging states and improve healthy orientation and self-competencies (Masten, 1994; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). They are resources that prevent people from being adversely affected by high-risk situations (Foster, 2013; Masten & Tellegen, 2012). While protective factors are the features that enable the nurturing of resilience, they may also emerge as a positive result of resilience (Masten & Coastworth, 1998). Depending on protective factors, teachers can achieve professional satisfaction, become more attached to their profession, and fulfill their responsibilities (Brunetti, 2006). Internal protective factors in teachers are motivation, locus of control, self-efficacy, effective problem-solving skills, coping and communication skills, and professional competence (Bandura, 1995; Bobek, 2002; Castro et al., 2010; Day, 2008; Day & Gu, 2007; Gu & Day, 2007; Kaldi, 2009; Kitching et al., 2009; Mansfield, Beltman, Price, & McConney, 2012; Sinclair, 2008; Tait, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Wollfolk-Hoy, 2007; Woolfolk-Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005). Environmental protective factors for teachers are collegial and management support, student-teacher relations, caring relationships and high field standards, professional development opportunities, and organizational commitment (Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Bobek, 2002; Brunetti, 2006; Day, 2008; Day & Gu, 2007; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Flores, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; 2013; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kitching et al., 2009; McCormack & Gore, 2008; McNally & Blake, 2009; Riolli & Savicki, 2003).

Methodology

This study is a qualitative study structured as a case study. The case study is a research method that is up-to-date and used to answer how and why questions in situations where the researcher's control is not over the variables (Yin, 2018). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview technique is suitable for obtaining in-depth information about participants' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about a topic (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Interview technique features such as interaction, flexibility, and in-depth examinations are used to reveal the experiences and the meanings attributed by the participants to the cases (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Focus group and individual interviews were conducted with the participants in the study. A focus group meeting was planned because of the participants' suitability and timing, but considering difficulties, such as planning, management, and equal participation (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008), individual interviews were also utilized. Thus, it was aimed to get more in-depth information by employing different data collection techniques.

The Study Group

The criterion sampling method was used to specify our study group to gain a deeper understanding of the research questions (Patton, 2002). Risk factors were examined in the school context. Therefore, having at least one risk factor and having at least 15 teachers working at the school were determined as a criteria. The study was conducted with teachers at a primary school in the province of Aydın, Turkey that has multiple risk factors such as being at a low socioeconomic level, being in a challenging area, having disadvantaged students and inadequate physical structure. The information about the school was acquired from The National Education Directory and school administrators. There were six participants in both the focus group and individual interviews. Participants were mostly women (female=10, male=2) and were aged between 32 and 60 years. Their teaching experiences ranged from 11 to over 30 years.

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form was employed in the data collection process. In preparing the interview form, first, the topics to be covered in the research were identified through the conceptual framework. General and open-ended questions were prepared in which participants could define resilience, describe their resilience, challenges they had experienced, the variables that sustained them in teaching, and also present their suggestions for the augmentation of resilience. After the pilot interview and expert opinions stages, the arrangements were made to, and the form took its last form.

Data Collection and Analysis

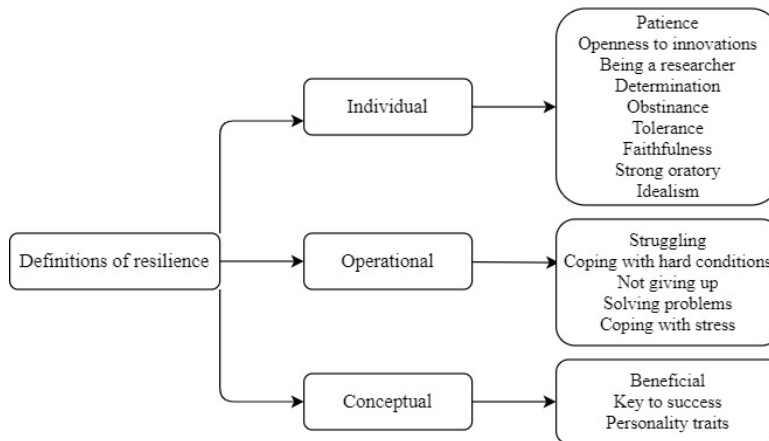
First, a focus group meeting was held with the participants at the school where they work. During the meeting, it was avoided to direct and limit the exchange of ideas. Individual interviews were conducted in the same week after the focus group meeting. Interview times were decided according to the participants' preferences. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews. The focus group took about one hour and individual interviews took between thirty and forty minutes. During the interview, the data were recorded on a tape recorder and then transcribed.

In the analysis of data, qualitative inductive content analysis was utilized which is defined as the systematic coding of data and creation specific themes and categories (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The participants were given code names, such as G1 (focus group) or B1 (individual). By reading the written data, meaningful units were regulated in line with the purpose, the data were coded, and the codes that are related to each other were synthesized. While identifying the codes, the frequency of repetition was noted, but it was not included in the presentation of the findings. After this stage, the data were arranged and presented using figures, and participants' views contributing to the themes and codes were included. In conclusion, six themes and twenty-six subthemes emerged. In collecting and analyzing qualitative data in the study, measures were taken to ensure credibility, such as the expert opinion in creating the data collection tool and a detailed explanation of the method, participants, sampling method, and the data collection tool. For transferability, the data were described without adding comments, direct quotations were included. To ensure verifiability, the data collection and analysis process was explained in detail. To ensure consistency in the study, the data were analyzed twice with a researcher who had qualitative research experience and the percentage of agreement was calculated. It was 78% for individuals and 82% for focus group interview data. A compliance percentage above 70% is reliable for researches (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The findings of the participants' views on the definition of resilience are presented in Figure 1.

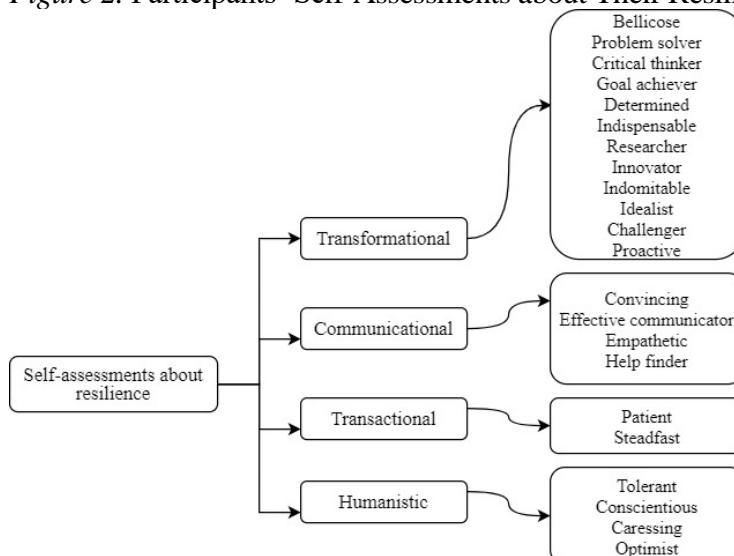
Figure 1. Participants' Definitions of Resilience



The results showed participants defined resilience as a personality trait under the themes of individual, operational, and conceptual. They explained the meaning of resilience in an individual context with examples such as being patient, being open to innovations, and being a researcher. For example, a participant said; *“to be faithful, to be open to innovations, to be patient”* (B2), and the other one stated; *“patience and tolerance”* (B6). Resilience as an operational characteristic was explained by behavior such as struggling, coping with hard conditions, and not giving up. One of the statements was; *“to cope with hardship, to struggle”* (G4), and the other was; *“to struggle with tough situations and coping with problems without stress”* (B6). Resilience as conceptual was exemplified as beneficial, key to success, and personality traits. A participant stated; *“I think it is a beneficial hallmark for teachers, and it may accelerate success”* (B2), and the other example was; *“resilience should be the personality trait of every teacher”* (B4).

The findings of the participants' self-assessments about their resilience characteristics are presented in Figure 2.

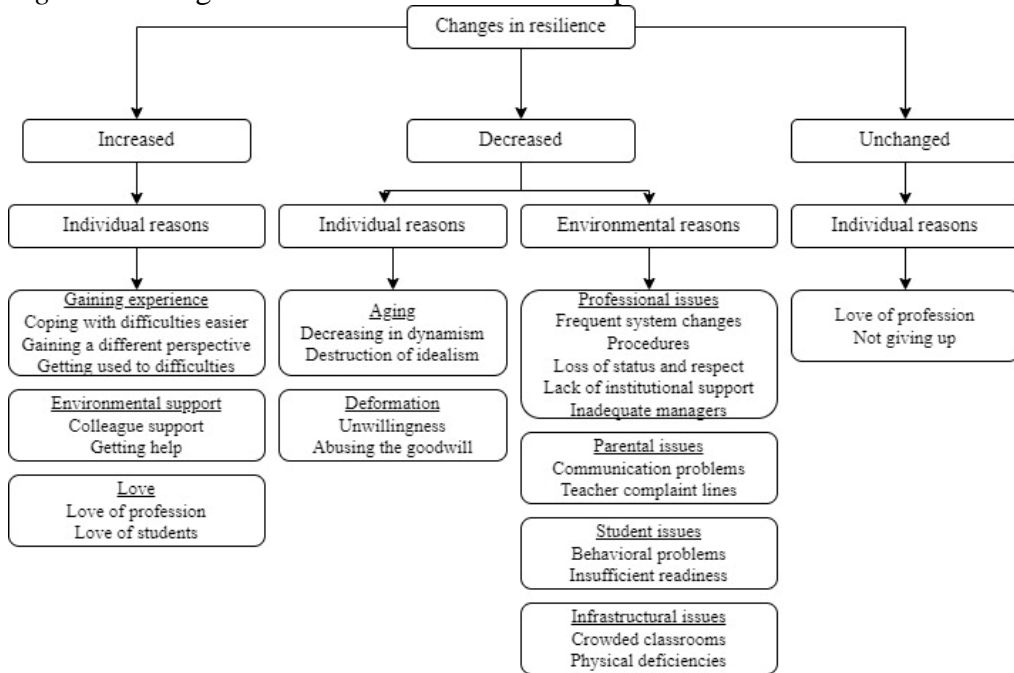
Figure 2. Participants' Self-Assessments about Their Resilience



As seen in Figure 2, participants described themselves as resilient and grouped their characteristics into transformational, communicational, transactional, and humanistic. Some traits that participants attributed to themselves are fighting, problem-solving, critical thinking, convincing, patience, and tolerance. The examples of transformational characteristics were being bellicose, problem solver, and critical thinker. For example, one said; *"I think about how best to turn negative into positive, I push all possibilities"* (G1) and the other stated; *"I define problems, think about the solutions, aim at solving problems, and definitely reach the results (B1)*. Communicational characteristics were exemplified being convincing and effective communicator. One of the statements was; *"I am an excellent communicator and a persuader"* (B1). Transactional characteristics were explained being patient and steadfast. An example was; *"since I believe in destiny, I say this shall pass and continue on my way patiently"* (B5). Humanistic characteristics of participants were being tolerant, conscientious, caressing, and optimist. A statement was; *"I make an effort, I do not give up quickly, sometimes I just see good sides"* (G2).

The findings of the changes in the resilience levels of the participants are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Changes in Resilience Levels of Participants

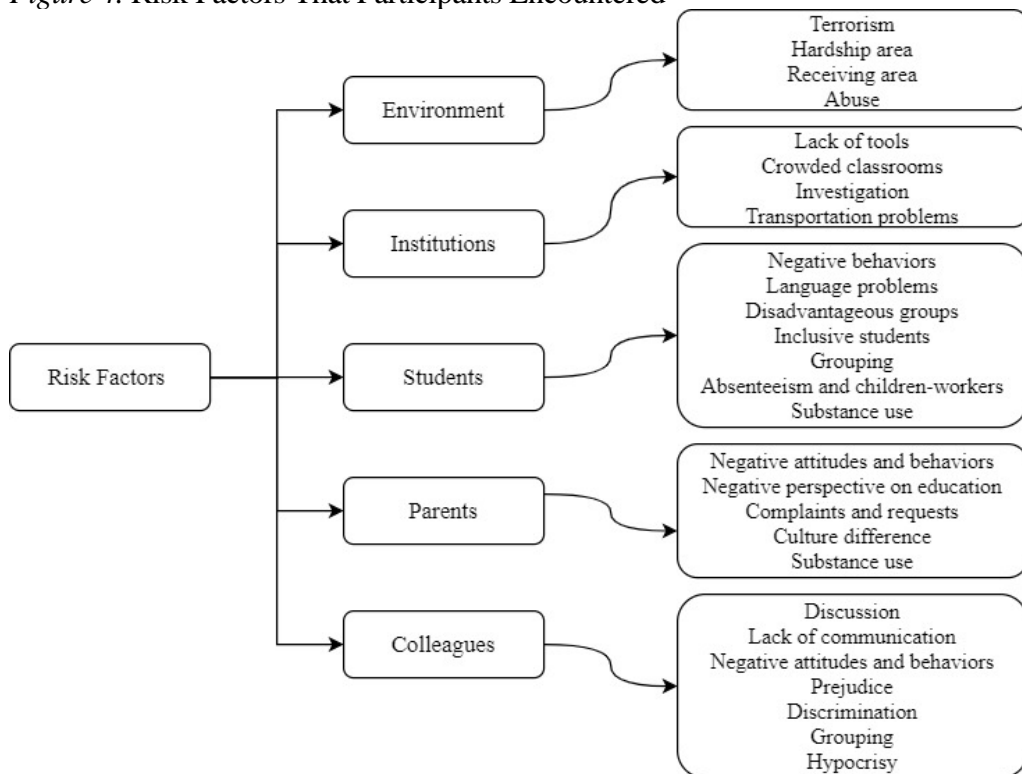


As seen in Figure 3, participants' experiences influenced their resilience, and they changed depending on different reasons. The participants who experienced a rise based this change on individual reasons such as gaining experience, environmental support, and love. A participant said; *"I think I have had enough experience for twenty-eight years. It works well to view things from different perspectives and get a hand in solving problems"* (B5). However, some individual reasons such as aging and deformation and environmental determinants such as professional, parental, student and infrastructre issues caused a decrease in their resilience. One said;

“there are a lot of chores besides teaching and they make us very nervous... We had dignity and punishment for students. The system is constantly changing. This is not a piece of cake. When teachers are fully adapted to the new one, it changes again” (B3). The other example was; “when our work turns into procedure and paperwork, we are not light-hearted” (G6). Some participants highlighted that they had no change in their resilience levels; The quote of a participant was; “If I were not resilient, I wouldn't be here. I continue to do my job with excitement” (B1).

The findings of the participants' views on the risk factors they faced are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Risk Factors That Participants Encountered

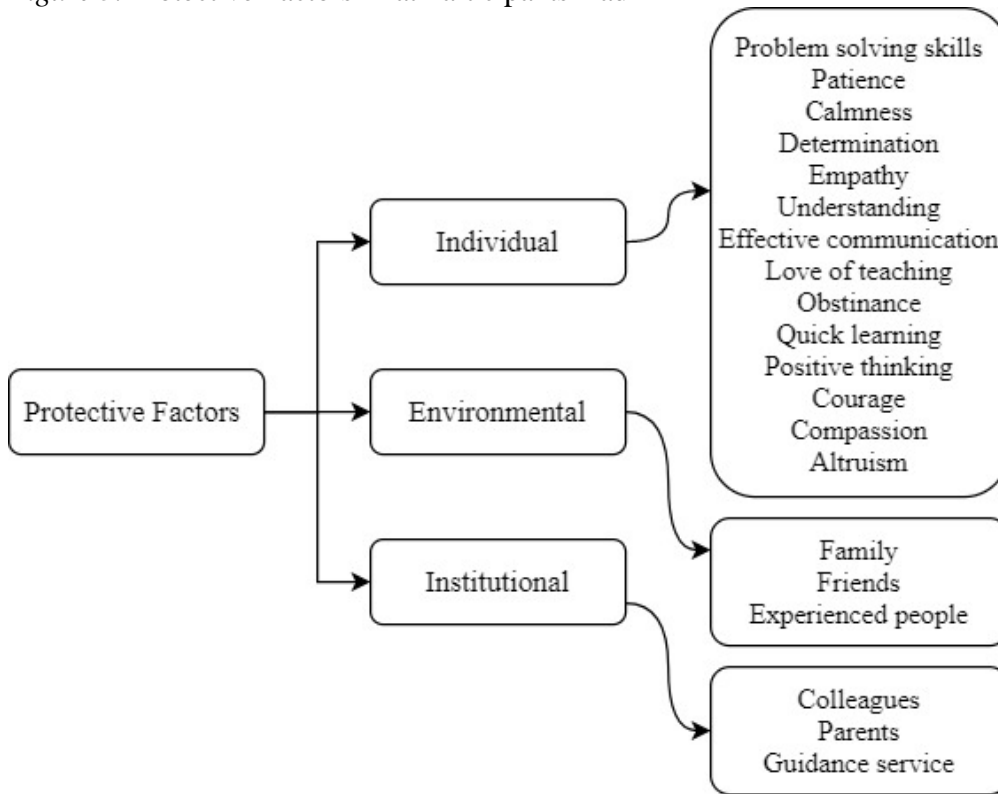


The results showed participants faced various risk factors in terms of environment, institutions, students, parents, and colleagues. Environmental risk factors examples were terrorism and hardship area. A participant said; “I worked at deprivation places. There was a language problem. I worked in a region that had immigration. This school was the riskiest place, and there were many kinds of risks” (G4), and the other stated; “I worked in an area that threatened security. Our buses were burned, the parents were in distress” (B3). They explained institutional risk factors as a lack of tools and crowded classrooms. A participant stated; “the distance from the school and the lack of equipment, I worked with large groups of students in multigrade classes” (B5). Risk factors about students were explained examples like negative behaviors, language problems, and disadvantageous groups. One stated; “student absenteeism, children-workers, I worked in challenging areas with disadvantaged students” (B6). Parental risk factors were exemplified by negative

attitudes and behaviors, negative perspectives on education, and complaints and requests. One quote was; “*parents are very demanding. Parents’ attitudes towards teachers...*” (G6). Risk factors regarding colleagues were explained on discussion, a lack of communication, and negative attitudes and behaviors. A statement was; “*hypocritical colleagues, discriminatory administrators*” (B5).

The findings of the participants’ views on the protective factors they have are presented in Figure 5.

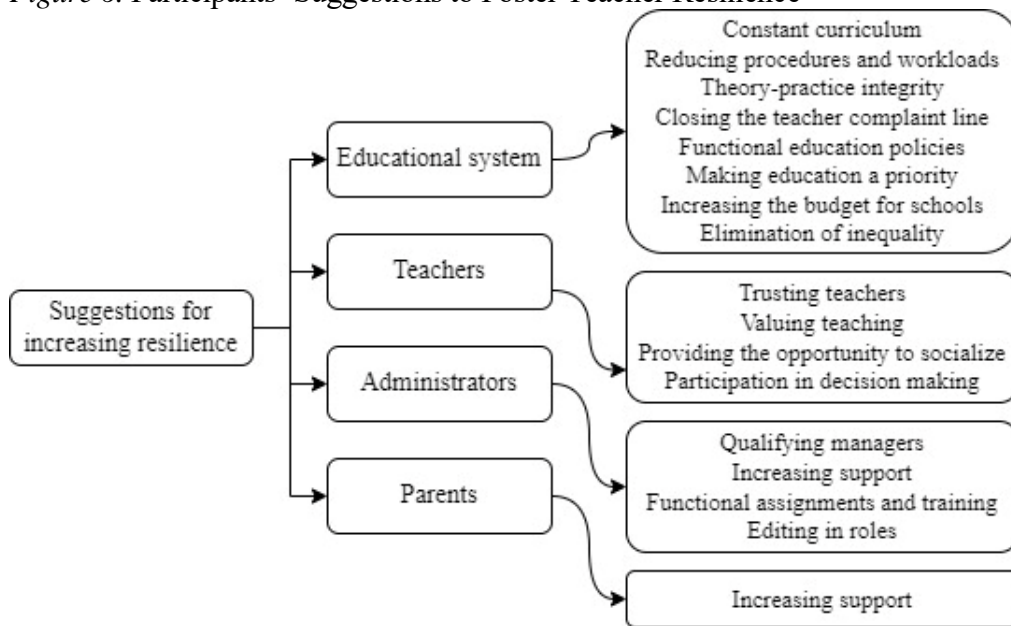
Figure 5. Protective Factors That Participants Had



As it can be seen in Figure 5, participants had some protective factors that assist them in overcoming problems, such as individual, environmental, and institutional. Individual protective factors examples were problem-solving skills, patience, calmness, determination, and empathy. A participant said; “*for me, to be understanding, to address the problem, to be courageous and not to be daunted*” (B5), and the other stated; “*I am determined and I try to find solutions to problems*” (G4). Environmental protective factors were explained by family, friends, and experienced people. An example was; “*I guess family the most, and friends support*” (B3). Institutional protective factors were colleagues, parents, and guidance service. One quote was; “*since I was single in the first year, my colleagues and my roommate. Later, I got married, and my husband was also a teacher*” (G4), and the other was; “*my teacher friends who are in the same position, the moral support we give each other*” (G5).

The findings of the participants’ suggestions to foster the resilience of teachers are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Participants' Suggestions to Foster Teacher Resilience



The results showed participants recommended some changes to make teachers more resilient. Their suggestions were in terms of the educational system, teachers, administrators, and parents. Examples of educational system suggestions were constant curriculum, reducing procedures and workloads, and theory-practice integrity. One said; *“teaching profession is no longer valued, and it includes a lot of procedures. The system is constantly changing”* (B3), and the other stated; *“theory and practice need to be in harmony”* (B6). Examples of suggestions about teachers were trusting teachers and valuing teaching. A statement was; *“our job should be only education. We should get more voice”* (G4). Suggestions regarding administrators were qualifying managers, increasing support, functional assignments and training, and editing the roles. One quote was; *“people who know the job should take the lead”* (G3), and the other one was; *“school administrators should make observations in the classroom on classroom management or education-related issues and increase their knowledge accordingly”* (G1). The parental suggestion was to increase support. A participant said; *“the difficult process can be overcome with the support of the parents and school guidance service”* (B4).

Discussion

The findings indicated that participants defined resilience as a phenomenon that includes individual, operational, and conceptual properties. These definitions overlap with many definitions in the literature (Hazel 2018; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2001; 2014; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Norman, 2000; Pooley & Cohen, 2010; Richardson et al., 1990; Rutter, 1990; Strumpfer, 2001; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Resilience is the ability to meet changing life requirements related to barriers and to get rid of deprecating emotions (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011), and the proficiency in coping with obstacles, uncertainty, and many other negative circumstances

(Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). There are also definitions, such as the capability to recover from troubles, invent different ways of coping, and gain new skills (Milstein & Henry, 2007). For teachers, resilience is the capacity to survive and live in distress; and it also ensures the sustainability of effectiveness in the functioning of teaching and learning processes despite many components that temporarily disrupt daily functioning or cause serious disruptions (Luthar & Brown, 2007).

As a result of the self-assessments, participants described themselves as resilient and thought they had some transformational, communicational, transactional, and humanistic characteristics. Indeed, common traits of resilient people are having realistic goals, a bright outlook, problem-solving skills, internal locus of control, self-control, and a sense of humor (Masten, 2021; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). They establish healthy relationships, accept difficulties and overcome them, have the power to control their lives (Greene, 2002; Thompson, Arnkoff, & Glass, 2011), give weight to self-improvement and strive for it, and discover new ideas (Patterson et al., 2004). They have the potential to affect their surroundings and power to gain an advantage from negatory status (Hanton, Evans, & Neil, 2003).

It was concluded that the resilience levels of the participants have changed over time. Although some participants stated that their resilience increased or did not change, most of them thought it diminished because of risk factors. Resilience has a structure that emerges with the interaction between people and their situations (Masten & Barnes, 2018), and their experiences and living conditions also affect it (Day & Gu, 2010; Gu & Day, 2013). Many studies stated that resilience is an attribution that can be advanced (Beltman et al., 2018; Benard, 2004; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Higgins, 1994; Johnson et al., 2014; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Resilience occurs in stressful events (Tait, 2008), and creating an atmosphere that provides care and backing can grow it (Luthar, 2005; Masten, 2014; Weston & Parkin, 2010).

The findings showed participants were exposed to severe or prolonged adversity across time. A previous study showed low wages, insufficient vacation and rest periods, problematic student behaviors, and heavy workloads cause stress and are mentioned as risk factors that teachers encounter (Beltman, 2021; Kelly, Sim, & Ireland, 2018; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Mansfield, Ebersöhn, Beltman, & Loots, 2018). The study also revealed that participants have had individual, environmental, and institutional protective factors. These results show parallelism with many protective factors of teachers referred to in the literature. Personality traits such as problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, and social competence are protective factors (Beltman, 2021; Benard, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Mansfield Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016; Masten et al., 1990), and they have an important role in enhancing resilience. In addition, management support, trust in management, and positive feedback from parents and students are effective in teachers' resilience and motivation (Brunetti, 2006; Castro et al., 2010; Gu & Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2016; Meister & Ahrens, 2011).

Participants had suggestions on the educational system, teachers, administrators, and parents for promoting teacher resilience. Resilience in the workplace is not only about reducing stress and burnout, but it is also a new area of interest focused on defining intimate power and considering the peripheral context (Day, 2014). When

educational institutions invest in the progress of resilience, they invest in both well-being and students' success (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). Teachers' resilience should be nurtured and supported within the school, and the school administration plays a critical role in building and sustaining resilience (Day & Hong, 2016). It is necessary to endorse and encourage teachers, students, and other staff to create a school climate that develops resilience (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). A school climate that promotes teacher resilience can be created by having assertive thoughts and expectations about teachers, providing opportunities to express their opinions, feelings of trust, interaction, and participation in decisions (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). The relevance of teacher professional learning programs and the existence of communities of practice is emphasized in some studies, highlighting its contribution to teachers' resilience and well-being (Clarà, 2017).

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore teachers' understandings and perceptions of resilience based on their experiences and perspectives. Revealing the meaning that teachers attribute to resilience plays a key role in spreading an awareness of their resilience and accelerating it, especially those who work under challenging circumstances. The current study seeks to add the growing diversity of global research in teacher resilience and has substantial implications for research and practice. The findings show it is very important to provide a field for revealing the personal strengths. It is suggested studying to foster teachers' participation in collaboration and decision-making processes by emphasizing the value of colleagues and management support. It is also recommended encouraging teachers to focus on thriving their resilience because of the positive impact on others and themselves. This study shows teacher resilience is influenced by different agents in their workplace, thus, longitudinal studies can be conducted following the same teachers and nurturing teacher resilience at various career stages.

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