Preschool Teachers' Perception on the Development and Promotion of Resilience in Young Children at Kindergarten

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript

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ABSTRACT

Aims: This paper aimed to examine preschool teachers' perception and understanding on the construct of "resilience" as well as the applied strategies for fostering preschoolers' resilience at the classroom.

Study Design: The study was conducted between January 2023 and May 2023 and a qualitative methodological approach was adopted.

Methodology: Data were collected through semi-structured, open questioned interviews with 16 preschool teachers (all women, age range 35- 56 years, with working experience from 5 to 20 years) working in public kindergarten at different regions of Greece territory.

Results: Thematic analysis was applied and the findings indicated that the majority of the participants perceived resilience as the ability to cope with adversity and bounce back, which is cultivated and didn't constitute a character trait. In relation to the strategies used by preschool teachers to promote resilience they emphasized the significance of the closeness of their

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relationship with children and family, the enhancement of social- emotional knowledge and skills (self-regulation, maintaining friendly relationships), the development of a positive classroom climate and the adaptation of proactive teaching practices (student-oriented and group-cooperative approach).

Conclusion: Although preschool teachers seemed adequate enough to foster resilience in young children they expressed their desire for more training in this field, as well as the need for support from experts (e.g. school psychologists, educational support structures).

1. INTRODUCTION

Resilience according to Masten et al. [1] is defined as "the process of, capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances". It refers to an individual's ability to achieve positive adaptation and recover from adversity, trauma, tragedy or threat by withstanding stress and maintaining normal levels of development [2,3] which begins to develop in the early years of life [4,5]. Its importance is significant considering that children nowadays develop in conditions that require flexible management of complex situations related to modern lifestyles and coping with various changes and challenges. Namely, research evidence has highlighted a wide range of situations that are considered 'risks' to children's development including the effects of war, natural disasters, crises, terrorism, domestic violence, divorce and other traumatic life events and/or chronic situations (e.g. migration, poverty, abuse) [6]. The negative effects of such stressors on early childhood children seemed to be sustained through later childhood or adolescence [7] and could lead to significant emotional deficits, difficulties in relationships with others and school failure [8]. Furthermore, statistics have indicated that although around 1 in 5 children have experienced some type of difficulty only two-thirds of them received the support they needed [9]. The above points up the necessity for effective and accessible interventions deliver in a universal context such as the school environment.

According to Masten and Motti-Stefanidi [10], schools can play an important role in fostering skills that facilitate children's resilience (e.g. problem-solving skills, self-regulation, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation and positive life meaning) by offering opportunities for interactions with peers, relations with other significant adult beyond parents and socioemotional learning [11]. They can also identify and address risks or mitigate their impact on children's development [12]. In particular, pre-school education, by promoting the development of skills that help children to respond in a critical and creative way to the challenges of their environment, can contribute to their all-round development and the formation of a positive attitude towards learning [13].

La Bar [14] summarized that early childcare setting and kindergartens need to be organized, encourage parental involvement, ensure the health and safety of children, have adequate physical space, provide appropriate equipment for learning and be staffed by teachers who are trained in child development and use appropriate teaching methods. Such schools are characterized as caring, attentive, stable and success- oriented [15] providing a positive learning environment. School staff, especially in preschool years act as a trusted and positive role model for personal recognition [16]. Other researchers have argued that teachers should have positive and high expectations, foster the development of problem- solving skills, internal locus of control, autonomy, optimistic feeling, sociability and encourage children to form positive relationships with others [17].

Based on the relevant literature recognizing the significant roles that schools and teachers play in developing resilience in young children, the aim of the current study was to investigate the construct of resilience and its promotion on a daily practical and applied context (such as public kindergartens), identifying what the preschool teachers believed to be the most forceful influences in such development and to provide a deeper and richer insight into their views of the applied strategies to foster resilience in the classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study and Research Design

The study presented in this paper, which lasted five months from January to May 2023, is a sub-

study of a wider project that aimed to investigate the phenomenon of resilience within the daily and most basic developmental context of preschool children such as family and school.

The qualitative research method was chosen in order to explore in depth the views of preschool teachers and also to record their lived experiences and feelings [18]. The main data collection tool was a semi-structured interview with open questions to preschool teachers who worked in public schools. It was considered a more relevant option allowing the development of a comfortable climate through the personal communication with the research while providing greater flexibility of manipulation (e.g. rewording, changing order or omitting questions). Finally, this tool offers possibilities of drawing extra-verbal information such as gestures, tone of voice, posture, etc.

For the needs of the interviews, an interview guide was designed based on three axes: (a) the definition of resilience, (b) preschool teachers' role on building young children's resilience and (c) the applied strategies/ practices to foster resilience in the classroom e.g.

1. "Have you heard the term "resilience"? What do you think it refers to?",
2. "What makes a child resilient? Describe some of the characteristics of a resilient child...",
3. "In your experience, do you think you can promote children's resilience and (re)empower them emotionally, socially or learning? If so, in what ways, if not, why?".

2.2 Participants and Procedure

Purposive sampling was used as the researcher discretionarily selected a small sample of interest that was considered most likely to lead to valuable and rich outcomes and simultaneously to save time [18]. Specifically, participants were 16 preschool teachers who were working in public kindergarten setting from different regions of Greece territory (e.g. Athens, Patras and northern Greece). All participants were women, with adequate working experience (from 5 to 20 years) and their age ranged from 35 to 56 years (M=46.9, SD= 4.28). Nine of the participants have completed a postgraduate degree in Educational Sciences, while all of them have attended training courses in children development and learning.

A first telephone or personal contact was made with the preschool teachers in order to inform them about the purpose of the research and the ethical rules of the interviews (e.g. consent, anonymity). All participants consented to be recorded. It was clearly explained that the recording is only required to ensure that what is said during the process would not be omitted or misrepresented.

More than half of the interviews (n=10) were conducted face to face in the kindergarten, a setting which was familiar to the teachers, at a quiet and convenient time in order to avoid possible interruptions or interference that could make the discussion that would follow difficult. The other interviews were conducted through videocall via Webex meetings or Skype and were recorded correspondingly. The duration of each interview did not exceed the 20 minutes to avoid any fatigue. Before starting each interview, emphasis was placed on creating a friendly, comfortable and trustworthy atmosphere between the researcher and the participants. At the beginning of the interview some certain demographic information was asked (e.g. age, working experience, studies). Informant confidentiality was secured through systematic anonymization of any potentially identifying signs in data collected through interviews prior to analysis and the use of codes for all participants.

The recorded data of individual responses were collated, transcribed and entered into a Microsoft Word document for further analysis. In order to analyze the qualitative data from interviews a thematic analysis was used. It was conducted following the 6-phase guide presented by Braun and Clarke (e.g. repeated reading of the data in an active way, producing initial codes from the data, searching for themes by sorting the different codes into them, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, presenting the report [18].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it was previously mentioned, the method through which the data were analyzed was thematic analysis. It was carried out based on the research questions, the themes of the interview guide, the participants' responses on them, researcher's interpretation of their meanings and the theoretical framework that emerged from the previous literature review [19].

In this section, we first briefly considered preschool teachers' perceptions of resilience and "resilient" preschoolers, before reporting the strategies they applied in the classroom to develop and promote resilience.

Responses to the question referring the definition of "resilience" illustrated preschool teachers' adequate understanding of this concept. In particular, resilience was seen by most participants either as "*holding up hardships*", "*coping with difficulties or stressors*", "*overcoming/ resisting adversities*", "*being tolerant*" (43,75%) or "*surviving*", "*responding to environmental demands in a positive way-adjusting*", "*recovery and maintaining mental balance*" (31,25%). The understanding that preschool teachers expressed was congruent enough with the definitions of resilience given in the introduction, a typical expression of a participant (PT 4) was the following: "*…the ability to bounce back difficult or challenging life experiences, overcome adversities and achieve a positive adjustment despite the negative odds so as the child can succeed and thrill*". Only few responses (12,5%) failed to meet the definition of resilience, for example: "*child's defenses*", "*positive attitude to disagreements*".

Furthermore, preschool teachers described "resilient" child using key words as presented in Table 1: being able to solve problems and not to give up (50%), having good social and communicational skills (making and maintaining relations with others) (43,75%), having high self-esteem (43,75%), expressing its feelings properly (25%), being in a positive attitude, optimistic and confident to take challenges (25%), having self- control/ self- regulation (25%), being independent in routines and decision- making (18,75%), being persistent but tolerant to frustration (18,75%), having imagination, interests and inventing different ways to overcome an obstacle (12,5%), being willing to follow rules/ obedient (6,25%). Three also mentioned (PT6, PT9, PT15) that beyond individual characteristics "*…resilient children live in a stable and caring family environment with secure bonds with the significant others … and participate in leisure activities*" (18,75%).

All preschool teachers in this study strongly agreed that they could play a crucial role in cultivating resilience in their young students, although some emphasized that the primary responsibility for this lied with the family, e.g.

PT 11 "*… I believe that resilience can be promoted in children "first of all" within the family. Family members need to create real relationships based on the values of love, mutual help and security. The family must spend quality time together. Of course, there must be clear and distinct boundaries within the family. Finally, parents and the child's caregivers in general should act as positive models of behavior and role models for the child.*"

When it came to the question of what they do to foster resilience, preschool teachers' responses focused mainly in four themes identified in the analysis namely: the quality of relations with their students and the families (75%), the importance of socio-emotional learning (43,75%), the creation of a positive climate with security and rewarding (43,75%) and the adaptation of appropriate teaching practices (31,25%) (Table 2).

More precisely, the majority of participants mentioned the importance of developing a loving, caring, supportive and trusting relationship with their students. They recognized that children needed to feel acceptance and secure in the presence of a reliable, authoritative teacher who could act as a positive role- model for them.

PT 2 "*… with acceptance, reinforcement, love, trust… with the certainty that the kindergarten teacher is "there" to listen to the needs, difficulties, threats, risks and help it*".

PT 9 "*… children see the teacher as a role model. She listens to their thoughts and feelings and encourage them to express them appropriately*".

PT 16 "*…I believe that the love you can give to children, the close and stable relationship you develop with them, the acceptance of their diversity, play a dominant role in this*".

Noted that they didn't only refer to their relationship with the children but also with the families. Many highlighted the importance of collaboration and positive communication with the children's parents in order to achieve the best outcome. They strongly believed that only by working together and sharing common expectation they would be able to promote children's resilience.

PT 3 "*… there should always be cooperation and common ground with the family, common boundaries and team work to provide the basics or fundamentals.*"

Table 1. Individual characteristics of students considered to be "resilient"

Responses	Frequency of participants' responses	% of Total
Problem solver	8	50%
Good social and communicational skills	7	43,75%
High self esteem	7	43,75%
Feelings expression	4	25%
Positive attitude, optimistic, excited	4	25%
Self- control/ self- regulation	4	25%
Independent	3	18,75%
Persistent, tolerant to frustration	3	18,75%
Imagination, creative thinking, interests	2	12,5%
Obedient	1	6,25%

Table 2. Applied strategies to foster resilience

Themes	Frequency of participants' responses	% of Total
Quality of relations with students and families	12	75%
Socio-emotional learning	7	43,75%
Positive and rewarding classroom climate	7	43,75%
Appropriate teaching practices	5	31,25%

Furthermore, throughout preschool teachers' responses there was a strong connection between socio- emotional learning and the promotion of resilience. Teachers were concerned to support their students in building social as well as problem- solving skills, for example expressing tense feelings, establishing and maintaining peer relationship, feeling and showing empathy for all, making responsible decisions, responding to challenges etc. Among important strategies discussed were allowing time for talking, nurturing a culture of kindness and rewarding, encouraging expression through art, analyzing what had happened or choices that had been made, practicing with their students on how to respond to certain social situations and teaching young children to work toward a common goal.

PT 1 "… *Of course kindergarten can build resilience especially with working on socialization daily. It can guide them to resolve these kinds of differences so that whatever the child is experiencing can be managed to express and resolve. Perhaps if we as teachers can put them in the shoes of others to understand how they feel, they can understand more*".

PT 5 "*Yes, with proper guidance you can teach a child to accept your help, to feel safe and confident in the environment in which he/she moves, to discuss and solve his/her problems and not to get angry, shout and give up but calmly try to find solutions and other ways of action, not to get frustrated but to feel that he/she will succeed at some point and in some way*".

PT 9 "*One way is the case-by-case management of all these situations that arise in a kindergarten, where young children interact with each other, with all that this implies, e.g. their conflicts, their personal failures and the failures of others, their successes and the successes of others, etc. A teacher can propose with his/her approach and with the 'words' he/she chooses to invest these everyday events a 'way of reacting' to the difficult situations a child may experience*".

It was also claimed that providing a positive and rewarding classroom environment preschool teachers believed that they enhanced the scaffolding of resilience. By expressing their high expectations for them, supporting them to achieve their goals, offering praises that were focused on their efforts, building understanding, providing opportunities for responsibility and contribution, treating them equally, emphasizing children's strengths and encouraging them to explore the environment teachers could create a classroom climate that built resilience.

PT 7 "*…also encouragement. Encouraging a child to take initiative and when they do something good to applaud them, not to encourage competition between them, to show them the necessary attention they need and respect for all children, not to leave any child out*".

PT12 "*I can train a child in the practice of giving feedback on what we succeed and fail at. The practice of setting new small goals when something goes wrong, the practice of saying 'it's okay...I'll try again...I'll try something else...'*".

Last but not least some preschool teachers referred to teaching practices that could give them tools for tackling learning tasks and applied practices that could promote resilience, such as student-oriented and group-cooperative approach.

PT 7 *"… By following a student-oriented teaching learning model ("what do you want to learn?", "how could we learn it?"). … by helping children work together in groups and identifying that they can all contribute to the team work*".

PT 8 "*The promotion of resilience can also result from a more systematic and targeted effort e.g. through educational programs, careful selection of stories and films/animations that can be processed in the classroom through workshops and experiential activities*".// PT13 "*The empowerment of children can be done through relevant programs, contact with art and culture, dynamic group interaction, positive thinking*".

PT 10 "*By using collaborative learning that involves students working in pairs or small groups to discuss concepts or find solutions to problems*".

Regardless their shared experience on how to build resilient children, some of them also expressed their anxiety and their need for support and further training in this field.

KT 5 "*My knowledge in resilience is empirical... clearly, I feel the need for further education. So I can better support my students*".

KT 8 "*I feel that it is important that our work in children development is supported by specialized staff such as psychologists and social workers*"

4. CONCLUSION

According to Masten and Coatsworth [20] in order to refer to resilience, the above must be presented: a) a significant treat or/ and an exposure to severe adversity or trauma that put individual in high risk and b) a positive adaptation/ development despite it. Based on that, most of preschool teachers in this study showed an adequate enough understanding of the term "resilience" in contrast with other research finding with teachers in higher educational levels [21]. In general, preschool teachers understood resilience as demonstrating the ability to find different solutions to cope with a problem, being independent, tolerant, strong willed, trying again/ not holding back and showing a positive attitude in the face of challenges or adversities. It was also noteworthy that in their responses all the identified characteristics of "resilient child" were positive and consistent with the relevant literature. More specifically, researchers agreed that resilient preschool children seemed to be friendly, adaptable, independent, persistent, goal-oriented with normal intelligence and an interest in exploring their environment [22,23]. They found to have a well-developed capacity for self-regulation which is considered critical for the development of adaptive behaviors (e.g. refraining from prohibited behaviors) [24]. According to others they had a positive sense of self, expressed their emotions appropriately, were socially responsive without showing shyness during interactions or aggressive behavior and were more accepted by their peers [25,26]. They were also described as sensitive, cooperative and compliant with their parents [27].

As concerned the practices they applied in the classroom to foster resilience they talked about the importance of all relationships (teacher- child, child- parents, teacher- parents) in scaffolding children's resilience, as well as the necessity of behaving as a role model for their student and providing them resources for socio- emotional learning to draw on. Additionally, almost half of the participants pointed out that in order to foster resilience the insurance of a positive and rewarding learning environment in the classroom where preschool teachers applied developmentally appropriate teaching practices was crucial.

The relationship between teachers- children and the holistic support for cognitive and emotional development from the curriculum in a positive learning climate at the classroom have emerged as a major factor for resilience in relevant literature [28-30]. Researchers suggested that in the classroom teachers could exude warmth, create opportunities for social play, read to children, involve them in classroom activities, value and reward their effort, encourage emotional expression by offering strategies when they become anxious (e.g., training the child to distract itself with an alternative activity) and

provide experiences through which they can develop initiative and executive functions [30-32]. Besides, based to Collet [33] they could provide children with strategies that build resilience (e.g., asking them to try a different way to solve a problem or to examine previous experiences) by teaching them that although learning requires effort on the other hand it provides satisfaction. In terms of developing social- emotional skills it has been found that it helps teachers to adopt practices where children are supported to form pairs, help each other, respect each other by understanding that everyone has their own value or strengthen their relationships by having a name or a motto for the class group [34]. Forming opportunities to play, especially in green yards, also subjects them to a process of negotiation, consensus and compromise, contributing significantly to improving resilience, increasing happiness and improving children's mental health [30,35].

Concluding, as preschool teachers had a strong desire for professional development, in order to cope with their demanding work of fostering young children's resilience, they seemed to need continuous training and a strong support network (school psychologist, education consultants).

Although the conclusions of this study pursued to provide practical insights for educators and policymakers there were some limitations too. Firstly, the small and relatively homogeneous number of participants and the choice of non-probability sampling. Although a convenient sample may provide answers to the research questions, it is not considered to be a completely representative of the population [36]. The use of a more diverse sample may strengthen the applicability of the findings. Another limitation concerns the collection of data from one source (preschool teachers) and the use of interviews as the only research tool. Future studies should include multiple informants (e.g., headmasters, educational consultant) and a variety of measures (e.g., questionnaire, observation and behavioral recording). Lastly, there can be a cultural bias taking under consideration that curriculum in Greek preschool education may differ from educational policies in other European or Asian countries.

CONSENT

As per international standards or university standards, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standards written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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