



THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' MENTAL RESILIENCE: PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract:

Mental resilience is crucial for effective school functioning. It is a prerequisite for ensuring high academic achievements, while high-quality education enhances students' levels of mental resilience. School is considered a protective mechanism for the development of students' mental resilience, acting as a shield against problematic family environments and adverse behaviors and conditions that students generally experience. The role of the educator is crucial in absorbing all these challenges, as well as in strengthening and mobilizing students. Qualitative research was conducted with semi-structured interviews with a sample of 12 primary school teachers. Findings indicate that educators perceive their role's challenges and strive to create a supportive school environment to develop students' skills. They highlight inadequate support structures, their insufficient initial training, and the need for theoretical and practical training. They seek collaboration with specialists and parents to enhance students' mental resilience.

Keywords: mental resilience, primary education, educators, role, suggestions

1. Introduction

Mental resilience is a multifaceted concept related to an individual's ability to positively adapt despite threatening situations or adversities. It involves the process and outcome of positive adaptation (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Masten, Beck & Garmezy, 1990) and the ability to recover from pressure (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006; Moore, 2013). Resilience has a developmental trajectory during which positive and negative elements are integrated to

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help individuals confront difficulties by balancing risk factors with protective factors (Rutter, 1987).

The development of psychological resilience is based on protective factors that need to be identified and explored within the individual's characteristics and interactions with family and society, including school, which is an integral part of it (Grotberg, 1995). In recent years, economic, social, and cultural changes have led to modifications in family structures, resulting in educators being called upon to fulfill a more demanding role (Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). Traditional educational practices are not sufficient to meet the educational needs of students, as increasingly divergent behaviors emerge, disrupting the school climate (Knight, 2007). Educators are required to develop and/or enhance students' mental resilience, recognize its characteristics, and reinforce them, serving as role models. A prerequisite for this is appropriate initial education and training (Nikolaou, 2018; Russo & Boman, 2007; Tzortzoglou, 2021), as well as educators themselves having high levels of mental resilience (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Inadequate training of educators in mental resilience issues, in managing various problematic behaviors and their fear of preserving their personal safety and mental balance (Wang, 2021) are factors that reduce their ability to meet this demand.

Educators, as individuals who can be trusted, have the ability to create a caring and supportive school environment, as their behavior and habits influence the learning process. They can effectively contribute to solving students' problems by building constructive relationships with parents and healthy bonds with colleagues, promoting a climate of collaboration and well-being in the school unit. It is essential for educators to express high expectations for students and provide them with ongoing opportunities for social participation, ultimately enhancing their mental resilience. This helps students develop characteristics such as social competence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, autonomy, a sense of identity, and a sense of purpose, which will be beneficial to them as future citizens (Williams *et al.*, 2013).

In a supportive school environment, opportunities are provided for the development of social relationships that enhance the sense of belonging (Amand, Girard & Smith, 2017). Additionally, through their participation in the group, students learn to express themselves, strengthen their critical thinking skills and reflective thinking, foster mutual assistance, care for younger or cognitively weaker peers, resulting in the enhancement of their mental resilience (Benard, 1993).

The expression of positive/high expectations, empathy (Brooks, 2001), differentiated expectations based on students' abilities and interests (Weinstein *et al.*, 1991), the provision of not only academic but also technical skills (Benard, 1993), the inclusion of students in heterogeneous groups (Benard, 1991, 1993), mobilization for active participation, and multidimensional assessment enhance self-expression (Benard, 1993). Self-expression can be realized through artistic activities, games, written production, or discussions (Nassou & Skourti, 2019), as well as through subjects such as painting, singing, dancing, and dramatic play (Delucia-Waack, 2006). Similarly, a more flexible curriculum tailored to students' needs and desires could mobilize them, make

them feel part of the educational system, feel secure, and strengthen their self-confidence (Henderson, 2011).

The mental resilience of educators is influenced by various factors, such as professional (e.g., autonomy, control, working conditions, class size), social (e.g., professional relationships, participation in decision-making), emotional (e.g., values, beliefs, perceptions, support from parents and school leadership), and motivational ones (e.g., school culture, goals, self-efficacy) (Mullen, Shields & Tienken, 2021). Specifically, support from colleagues and the school principal is important for self-efficacy, contributing to enhancing the mental resilience of both the educator and the students (Trikkaliotis, 2018). It is essential to support educators to achieve the high goals set by educational systems worldwide (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020), as they often experience professional burnout (Ebersöhn, 2014).

The aim of this study, which is one of the few in Greece, is to document and highlight the role, specifically the practices of educators in enhancing students' mental resilience, as well as the proposals they make to enable the school environment and themselves to cope with their new multidimensional role and the dynamic, evolving relationship between them and the students (Keramari, 2017).

The two research questions that emerged from the systematic review of the literature (e.g., Andersson, Cäker, Tengblad & Wickelgren, 2019; Chmitorzet *et al.*, 2018; Choi *et al.*, 2019; Kaplan, 2013; Leppin *et al.*, 2014; Oshio, Taku, Hirano & Saeed, 2018; Zhao, Fu & Zhou, 2020) were as follows: (a) *What is the role of educators in promoting students' mental resilience?* and (b) *What proposals do educators make to enable the educational system and themselves as members to effectively promote students' mental resilience?*

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Process

After reviewing the relevant literature, the type and purpose of the research, the research tool, data analysis, issues of validity, reliability and ethics were decided (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). To serve the purpose of this research, a qualitative interpretive approach was utilized, which studies the nature of phenomena (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020) and aims to deepen understanding through detailed descriptions and interpretations of phenomena by the individuals themselves (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection tool, characterized by flexibility and encouraging interviewees to express themselves freely (Qu & Dumay, 2011), allowing the researcher to gather a wealth of information (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) and delve into personal experiences and opinions of the interviewees regarding real events or behaviors (Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

The research was conducted from October 2021 to February 2022. Convenience sampling was used (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), allowing the selection of individuals most easily accessible at the specific time based on the researcher's available resources. The research sample consisted of 10 educators, 7 females and 3 males, serving for 8 to 20 years in

primary schools, with 8 having postgraduate studies. Due to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, 5 out of the 10 interviews were conducted remotely.

Initially, 2 pilot interviews were conducted to improve the interview guide. Theoretical saturation occurred at the 8th interview, as the collected information had addressed the research questions (Tsiolis, 2018). However, to enhance the credibility and validity of the research, two additional interviews were conducted.

The richness of responses, voluntary participation, and lack of bias among researchers, despite the acknowledged subjectivity, contribute to the validity of the research (Winter 2000, as cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 133). Confirmation from two participants regarding the accurate recording and transcription of their opinions (Symeou, 2007) also enhances the research validity. Research validity, good design, the experience and the presence of researchers in various educational leadership positions for many years contribute to the research reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln, 2001).

All ethical and moral rules were followed in all phases of the research, with detailed information provided to participants about the research purpose for their consent, ensuring their anonymity, protecting personal data, maintaining full confidentiality, privacy, and even the right to withdraw, while there was no financial or other benefit for the researchers (Lune & Berg, 2017; Qu & Dumay, 2011)

2.2 Data Analysis

The extraction, decoding, analysis, and interpretation of the data were conducted based on the six stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016). Despite some limitations, thematic analysis remains a clear method that allows for data identification and the generation of themes to describe them (Lochmiller, 2021).

In this study, the following codes emerged from the initial recording: (a) responsibility, (b) complementarity, (c) secondary role, (d) perspective, (e) engagement, (f) inspiration, (g) activation, (h) collaboration with family, (i) calmness, (j) safety, (k) democracy, (l) climate, (m) acceptance, (n) expression, (o) interaction, (p) groups, (q) strategies, (r) self-empowerment, (s) autonomy, (t) interdisciplinarity, (u) problem-solving, (v) taking responsibility, (w) goal-setting, (x) undergraduate programs, (y) lessons, (z) educational system, (aa) self-improvement, (ab) training, (ac) theory, (ad) practical intervention, (ae) workshops, (af) structure, (ag) psychologist, (ah) social worker, (ai) EAP, (aj) counseling, (ak) collaboration, (al) specialization.

The codes (a) to (c) are organized in the new code (I) "taking responsibility", codes (d) to (h) in code (II) "advisory role", codes (i) to (p) in code (III) "organization of supportive environment", codes (q) to (v) in code (IV) "skills development", codes (w) to (y) in code (V) "initial training", codes (z) to (ac) in code (VI) "training", codes (ad) to (ag) in code (VII) "organization of school units", codes (ah) to (al) in code (VIII) "collaboration with professionals". Codes I & II constitute the theme "Role dimensions" and codes III & IV the theme "Good Practices", for topic A "Educators' Role". Codes V & VI constitute the

theme "Educators' Knowledge" and codes VII & VIII the theme "Structural Elements", for topic B "Educators' Proposals".

3. Results

In this section, we present the results of the analysis of teachers' responses in two thematic categories. The first category explores their role in supporting students' mental resilience, while the second category includes their suggestions on the issue.

3.1 Educators' Role

In response to the open question, educators were asked to share their views on their role in promoting students' mental resilience. While all acknowledged that it is part of their role to promote mental resilience, they emphasized that this role is complementary to the family's primary role. Additionally, a significant number of educators (6 out of 10) mentioned their counseling role, serving as both a support system and a role model for students. When it comes to best practices for enhancing students' mental resilience, the majority of the educators (8 out of 10) highlighted the importance of creating a school climate characterized by safety, acceptance, collaboration, and freedom of expression to promote social inclusion and holistic personal development. They also emphasized the significance of utilizing everyday classroom experiences for discussions aimed at developing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which effectively contribute to enhancing their mental resilience.

Table 1: The role of educators in promoting students' mental resilience

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative quotes
Role dimensions	Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>"It is important, but I consider it to be secondary."</i>• <i>"After family, it also plays a significant role."</i>• <i>"The role of school functions as complementary."</i>
	Counseling role	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>"Empower the children, help them recognize their positive qualities, abilities, and even where they feel they can't, find a way to motivate them."</i>• <i>"Provide children with a perspective and let each child progress, cultivate, and manage it as they see fit."</i>• <i>"Engage with each child as a unique individual."</i>
Good Practices	Organization of a supportive environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>"Ensure a calm and safe environment, address cases of bullying, and avoid isolating students. Encourage students to express their opinions and viewpoints."</i>• <i>"Create a climate where mistakes are not judged, freedom of speech and questions are allowed, and nothing is considered condemnable or foolish."</i>• <i>"A positive school environment, a good circle of friends, and acceptance through friends help individuals maintain better mental health and prevent them from reaching their limits."</i>
	Skills development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>"Children should not be taught what to learn but how to learn. The teacher should provide them with guidelines and let them discover new"</i>

		<p><i>knowledge on their own, develop critical thinking and opinions, and design possible problem-solving strategies."</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Every child should be able to express their imagination, opinions, and personality."</i> • <i>"Real-life problem situations should be presented. Every event should be an opportunity for problem-solving, utilizing the thinking of all students and their ideas to come up with solutions."</i>
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3.2 Educators' suggestions

In the second open-ended question, educators were asked for any suggestions regarding the issue of mental resilience. Seven out of ten educators acknowledged their own deficiency in recognizing and promoting students' mental resilience. They propose enriching the curriculum of prospective educators, as well as the school curriculum, and implementing training activities in real-life situations of daily school life. Additionally, 6 out of 10 suggest the need to staff schools with other professionals and collaborate with them and the educational community as well to effectively support students and themselves.

Table 2: Educators' suggestions for students' mental resilience

Subtheme	Codes	Illustrative quotes
Educators' knowledge	Initial training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"In undergraduate programs of universities which are related to pedagogy, there should be significant emphasis on mental resilience within psychology courses, not only for students but also for educators."</i> • <i>"The subject of mental health should be taught in the Greek educational system."</i>
	In-service education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"I certainly need training...to understand exactly what mental resilience is and what it includes, which areas it covers, and good practices that we can use in the classroom."</i> • <i>"I need training that focuses more on interventions in the classroom... in terms of counseling... team organization, team dynamics, being able to better understand... the social and emotional profiles of students."</i>
Structural elements	School unit organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"It is important to have a psychologist and a social worker in every school to support each child."</i> • <i>"Diagnosis and Support Committees should be in every school."</i>
	Collaboration with professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...Having someone you can turn to for guidance and support, such as a psychologist who can provide counseling and support in any effort you make with a child."</i> • <i>"...Having mental health professionals in schools who would provide support to the entire school community, including students and educators, with the involvement of the parent association."</i>

4. Discussion

Regarding the first research question, educators mentioned that their role is important in promoting students' mental resilience. At the same time, they regard their role as complementary to that of the family, which they consider the most important. However, most educators who participated in the research recognize the counseling dimension of their role and that they serve as strong role models for students (Benard, 1991, 1993, 1995; Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Weinstein *et al.*, 1991). They acknowledge that students coming from dysfunctional family environments perceive the role of educators as parental, leading them to take on the duty of caring for them (Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012).

Furthermore, educators point out that it is their responsibility to organize a healthy, safe school climate of well-being and wellness (Brouwers & Tomic, 2001), characterized by acceptance, consistency, collaboration, and free self-expression, facilitated by the use of artistic subjects that promote students' creativity (Delucia-Waack, 2006). This fosters social competence, a key characteristic of students' mental resilience, which in turn enhances their overall personality development (Benard, 1991, 1993; Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2020). The self-efficacy and confidence of the educators influence their attitude in the classroom and, consequently, in the school, as they can take initiatives, plan actions to enhance the well-being of the school environment (Trikkaliotis, 2018), and effectively manage student behavior, garnering support from colleagues and superiors (Brouwers & Tomic, 2001). Additionally, assuming responsibilities (Benard, 1993) and cultivating empathy are elements that should thrive in the school context, as they allow for acceptance, respect for others' mistakes, and non-targeting of the student (Brooks, 2001). It is worth noting that the educators who participated in the research confirmed that the value of collaboration with peers is significant (Benard, 1995), as well as the formation of heterogeneous groups and the processes within them, as they prove to be factors of personal development and social identity (Amand, Girard & Smith, 2017).

Subsequently, educators highlighted the development of skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving ability, and taking initiatives, as characteristics of mental resilience that can be cultivated in the classroom through the curriculum (Henderson, 2011). A good practice highlighted for this research is the use of teaching content from school subjects to present problematic situations and case studies that promote dialogue, allow for free expression of ideas, encourage the development of strategies and alternative solutions, argumentation, and primarily the destigmatization of mistakes. For example, subjects like Physical Education and anything related to body movement enhance students' autonomy, stimulate imagination and self-expression (Benard, 1993).

Regarding the second research question about educators' proposals on the issue of mental resilience, their responses highlighted the importance of adequate initial training, in-service education, and the proper organization and functioning of school units.

They pointed out a lack of knowledge, emphasizing the need for educators' training to extend beyond theoretical knowledge to practical skills to ensure effective teaching abilities. Strengthening educators with the necessary knowledge and support

will contribute to enhancing their mental resilience, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Pedagogical well-being methods and school practices prioritizing health and care are crucial for human survival. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of educators often declines as many feel disillusioned during their careers due to the gap between initial expectations and school reality, underscoring the need for psychological support and adequate educational training.

On the other hand, concerns have been raised regarding the proper organization and functioning of schools, emphasizing the need to strengthen schools with professionals such as social workers and psychologists, as well as fostering collaboration with the broader educational community and parents. Additionally, providing educational and psychological support to educators themselves through intervention programs has been proven effective over time. This study confirms findings from previous research and highlights factors such as anxiety, lack of training, limited working conditions, lack of support for school structures and educators, lack of incentives, implementation of unproductive programs, burnout, and non-competitive salaries leading to decreased interest among educators and a need for their withdrawal.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the research, utilizing semi-structured interviews, explored educators' perspectives on their role in enhancing students' mental resilience, the practices they follow, and highlighted some relevant requests or proposals they made in this direction. From the participants' responses in this study, it emerged that educators perceive the importance of their role in promoting students' mental resilience. They recognize the changing landscape of the school, with the educator at the center of development, as well as the demands of the state. They are also aware of changes in family structure, which in turn affect the school system. It is now necessary to establish a pedagogy of relations and enhance their counseling role to strengthen relationships among students, as well as the teacher-student relationship, so that students can achieve not only high academic achievements but also the highest possible levels of mental resilience. Due to their ethics, compassion, love, and optimism, they make efforts to empower students, without knowledge of the characteristics of mental resilience or appropriate initial education or in-service education on mental resilience issues.

In their effort to meet this demanding new role in an ever-changing environment, they propose some suggestions whose implementation would significantly contribute to the creation of a school of well-being, with increased levels of empathy where educators and students can develop integrated, multifaceted personalities, constructive collaborations are formed, healthy relationships are shaped, and maximum learning outcomes are achieved. They understand the educational and social context and propose enriching the undergraduate study programs of future educators in issues of mental resilience. Additionally, they consider it imperative for the Ministry of Education to conduct relevant training programs, providing educators with good practices. Among

other things, they emphasized the absolute necessity of permanently staffing educational structures with specialized professionals to manage educational and social issues that arise daily, in collaboration with parents and guardians. Finally, they also highlighted the need for their own psychological support.

The relatively small sample size and the necessity of conducting remote interviews may pose some limitations to the research, but this does not diminish the value of the findings.

Future research could investigate the effectiveness of training programs for educators in developing their mental resilience and its impact on the educational process, personal development of students, and overall school climate.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Angeliki Artemidi serves as a teacher at primary schools and as an occupational therapist. Her research work refers to topics such as pedagogy, psychology, educational and neurodevelopmental difficulties. She has participated in European programs, in seminars and conferences about general and special education, psychology, students with special needs and neurodevelopmental difficulties. She has published articles(4) on the above topics.

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