



## **Resilience in Preschool Children – The Perspectives of Teachers, Parents and Children**

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The aim of this paper is to explore how parents, teachers and children in early years' education understand the concept of resilience. The paper analyses the understanding of the concept of resilience in a Croatian kindergarten using qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative research consists of a thematic analysis of data collected through 3 focus groups with 10 parents, 9 teachers and 11 children respectively. The quantitative research includes an analysis of data collected through the Scale of Socio-emotional Wellbeing and Resilience in Preschool Children which teachers and parents completed to assess the resilience of 116 children from a public kindergarten in a city of northern Croatia. The qualitative data indicates that parents and teachers have a different understanding of the resilience concept, while the quantitative data shows that parents, in comparison with teachers, assess all aspects of children's resilience more positively.

**Keywords:** resilience, perspectives, parents, teachers, children, early years

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### **Introduction**

There are various definitions of the term 'resilience' in the literature, but usually, we can find two basic criteria in most definitions, namely, a significant threat or serious difficulties/adversity on the one hand, and positive adaptation or a positive developmental outcome/growth on the other hand (Herrman et al., 2011; Hill, Stafford, Seaman, Ross, & Daniel, 2007; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Ungar, 2011). Resilience is referred to as an interactive concept, process or construct. For instance, Luthar et al., (2000, p. 543) describe

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resilience as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”. Cicchetti (2010, p. 146) holds that “Resilience is not something an individual ‘has’ – it is a multiply determined developmental process that is not fixed or immutable”. Ungar (2011) emphasises that resilience depends less on the personal characteristics of an individual, and more on his or her social and physical context, and suggests that more focus should be placed on ecological conditions that can help positive growth under adversity. In their review article on resilience, Herrman et al. (2011) conclude that resilience is defined as positive adaptation or the ability to maintain or re-establish mental health, in spite of experiencing difficulties. Howell, Graham-Bermann, Czyz, and Lilly (2010) conceptualise resilience as strengths in emotion regulation and prosocial skills, two areas crucial to the development of preschool children.

The sources of resilience can be personal, biological, environmental or systemic. All the sources are in mutual interaction. Ferić, Maurović and Žižak (2016) emphasise that resilience is a concept that has developed from focusing on the individual to focusing on his or her wider environment. The individual’s situation is important. Physical resilience is more important in some situations, while in others, such as when parents are divorcing, emotional resilience is more relevant (Herbert, 2005). Some advocate “investigating the dynamic interplay among physiological arousal, executive functions, and contextual experiences” (Obradović, 2016, p. 65). Based on various ecological studies, Ungar (2011) underlines the importance of processes leading to a child’s positive development in spite of difficulties, and emphasises that our focus should be on the environmental factors which can help the child develop resilience competences. Interventions such as providing support for parents and targeted programmes in preschools and schools can certainly increase children’s resilience, particularly in those children who face serious difficulties (Herrman et al., 2011).

While there is general agreement in the literature on the main criteria in defining resilience, school teachers, parents and children may have varying and sometimes contrasting views of the phenomenon. Hill et al. (2007, p. 39) argue that “most of the literature has applied the concept of resilience ‘from above’ as an expert concept, rather than tapping the meanings and suggestions of parents and other family members about what helps (or does not help) them to overcome different kinds of stressful and difficult experiences, and to develop strengths to face new challenges”.

In a focus group with 13 primary school children (7th grade), some children had a negative perception of resilience, saying that resilient people do not obey social rules, are lonely, stubborn or disobedient. Those who perceived resilience positively agreed that “a resilient individual is someone who can resist negative influences” (Mataga Tintor, 2013, p. 82). The same study showed that parents understood resilience more as a medical construct (a strong immune system) than as a psychological one. Those who understand it more as a psychological category identify it with resistance to external influences, which could be both positive and negative. Teachers also talk about resilience as resistance to negative influences and resistance to positive influences, but they are more oriented to school policy and political influences (Mataga Tintor, 2013).

Other studies found that in relation to the school environment, parents and teachers do not differ greatly in their understanding of resilience, but children attach different meanings to the phenomenon. In pupils' stories, resilience is connected to: family expectations, pleasing oneself and others, and adapting to a grading system (Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017). Pupils' views of their own resilience depend on their teachers' and parents' views (Rautiainen, Rätty, & Kasanen, 2015). It seems that parents' and teachers' views of the child's competences moderately correlate, but parents have greater optimism concerning the child's potential for improvement (Kärkkäinen, 2011, Rautiainen, Rätty, & Kasanen, 2017).

## **Method**

This study seeks to discover how teachers, parents and children in early education view the concept of resilience and what would be helpful to them before the implementation of a resilience curriculum in the classroom (Miljevic Ridicki, Bouillet, & Cefai, 2013). We sought to answer the research question through a mixed method research design as explained in the following sections. An ethical codex for undertaking research with children (Ajduković & Kolesarić, 2003) was applied (concerning the wellbeing of children and respecting children's rights). Adult participants were informed about the purpose of the research. All of them participated voluntarily.

### *Qualitative analysis*

The advantage of qualitative analysis is "that it has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts" (Mason, 2002, p. 1). We wanted to find out how the different parts of the child's microsystem understand 'resilience'. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups in one kindergarten school in Croatia.

Three focus groups were set up for three groups of research participants (children, parents and teachers). Participants had the opportunity to answer questions on their opinion of resilience, the factors which are important for building resilience, and about their expectations from the resilience curriculum to be implemented in their school. The participants consisted of 11 children, 10 parents and 9 teachers respectively. Homogeneous sampling was used, because the purpose of the focus groups was to bring together teachers, parents and children with similar experiences, as well as to describe a particular subgroup in depth (Palinkas et al., 2013). All participants were from the same kindergarten school and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Three focus groups were held as follows:

- focus group with teachers: all teachers that work at the same unit of the same kindergarten who were able to participate (9);
- focus group with parents: one parent of each child that participated in the focus group (8 mothers and 2 fathers);
- focus group with children: 11 5-6 year old children (5 girls and 6 boys). This is the oldest group in the kindergarten.

The discussion in the focus groups was led by two researchers in each group. The focus groups with parents and teachers lasted 60 minutes each and that with the children 25 minutes.

Once the rules for the work of the focus groups were presented and explained, the teachers and parents expressed their positions on the following questions:

- In your opinion, who are resilient people?
- What are their characteristics?
- Do you think you are resilient?

Teachers were also asked about their opinion on the following questions:

- What sort of professional assistance would you need from the kindergarten in order to feel more resilient?
- How can you see that the children in your group are resilient?

In addition, parents were asked about their point of view on the following questions:

- What would help you increase your resilience?
- Are your children resilient? What are the characteristics of their resilience?

The conversation with children was made appropriate to their stage of development. They were asked questions such as:

- What helps to have an easy time at school?
- What do you do when you are having a hard time?
- What would you recommend your best friend to do when he or she is having a hard time?

The discussion in the focus groups was transcribed and analysed according to the model developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each statement was carefully analysed and coded. The codes helped to organise data into meaningful groups. After carefully analysing the data for each of the groups, the answers were sorted into appropriate categories. Similarities and differences across the data set were recorded. The key features of the large body of data were summarised and relevant themes related to the research questions were identified. Some illustrative statements were extracted and are presented in this paper. Thematic maps containing the main content and conclusions of the discussion were also made.

### *Quantitative analysis*

The quantitative analysis was conducted with a sample of teachers and parents of 116 children from 6 kindergarten groups that constitute the school in this study. Each kindergarten group has 19.3 children on average, and the number of children per group ranges from 13 to 25 children. Basic information on the assessed children is presented in Table I.

**Table I. Description of assessed children**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Female</b>	67	57.8	7 years	46	39.7
<b>Male</b>	49	42.2	6 years	42	36.2
			5 years	13	11.2
			4 years	6	5.2
			3 years	4	3.4
			2 years	5	4.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>116</b>	<b>100</b>

In order to collect and analyse the data, children were divided into three groups. The first group consisted of children aged six to seven (75.9%), the second group children aged five and four (16.4%), and the third group children aged three and two (7.7%). The qualifications of parents assessing children's resilience range from those who have completed only primary school to those who have gone through higher education (university and beyond). In the sample, parents who completed secondary and higher education prevail. The research sample comprises 46 mothers (41.4%) and 68 fathers (58.6%) who have completed secondary education, while there are 59 mothers (50.9%) and 34 (29.3%) fathers who have completed higher education.

The instrument used in this part of the research was the 'Scale of Socio-emotional Wellbeing and Resilience in Preschool Children' (Tatalović Vorkapić and Lončarić, 2014) which was standardised on a sample of young and preschool children in Croatia. Based on the assessments of resilience of 1,792 young and preschool children, the authors established that the scale measures five aspects of resilience, namely,

1. making contact/social performance – including patterns of communication in peer relations and other social relations, and initiating social interactions (6 items, Cronbach Alpha coefficient = .92)

*Example: The child easily establishes positive contact with peers.*

2. self-control – including the ability to consciously and deliberately manage behaviour by controlling urges, maintaining concentration, etc.; (8 items, Cronbach Alpha coefficient = .92)

*Example: The child respects the boundaries and desires of other children.*

3. assertiveness – including the ability to verbally express emotions, needs, thoughts and wishes in an appropriate and purposeful manner (7 items, Cronbach Alpha coefficient = .87)

*Example: The child is persistent in his initiatives.*

4. emotional stability/coping with stress – including usual emotional responses to situations and stimuli from the environment and stress management methods (8 items, Cronbach Alpha coefficient = .85)

*Example: The emotional reactions of the child are appropriate to the situation.*

5. pleasure in exploration – including curiosity and openness to new situations and experiences (8 items, Cronbach Alpha coefficient = .92)

*Example: The child is optimistic when something new starts.*

The scale consists of 37 items and is scored on a Likert-type five point scale of agreement with the statements. The quantitative data were analysed at a descriptive level. Differences in the assessments of children's resilience between parents and teachers were calculated using a T-test.

## **Results**

### *Analysis of qualitative data*

When asked 'who' resilient people are, teachers gave answers that can be grouped into the following categories (illustrative statements are written in italics):

- Those in particular professions – resilient people choose certain professions that require resilience (teachers claimed they are the third among professions requiring resilience, after politicians and medical workers): “We are resilient. Only resilient persons can work here.”; “At the beginning, I thought I was not resilient. But now, 20 years later, I think I am.”
- Those who experience more stress. A greater amount of stress increases resilience (or, resilient people can endure more stress): “We have to endure hundreds of stressors daily, sometimes because of the kids, sometimes because of the parents. A resilient person must be ready for anything.”
- Those who are successful at managing their own emotions, such as sadness: “I have my personal problems which make me sad. But I forget about them when I am with children.”
- Those who are empathic: “A child could be sad, or like this or like that... You have to understand everything, be empathic.”
- Those who have innate survival mechanisms and good defence mechanisms: “I think we have been born with defence mechanisms. They are sleeping deep down inside, but when something bad happens, they activate themselves.”
- Those who have the ability to face difficult situations, losses, and rejection: “If you are resilient, you can face difficulties. What does not kill me makes me stronger.”
- Those who have strong motivation to persist and reach their goal: “You have to be motivated for your job, otherwise you will drop out.”

When asked to describe resilient children teachers mentioned qualities like satisfied, happy, self-aware, well-adjusted, emotionally mature and stable, sure of themselves.

The parents' answers to the question, 'who' are resilient people, included the following:

- Those who do not take work home with them: “My husband is resilient. He is a person who has a demanding, responsible and hard job, but he does not bring his work home. When he comes home, he shuts the door and finishes with the job.”
- Those do not make their problems worse by constantly thinking about them: “I keep thinking of my problems... My husband says: “You have a problem? Is there a solution? A, B or C? Let’s solve it!”
- Those who leave the past behind: “Resilient people live here and now, in the present moment. They leave the past behind.”
- Those who are cognitively and emotionally mature: “I do not know whether it is an experience or something else, but he is cognitively and emotionally mature.”
- Those who know what is important: “They have a feeling for important things.”
- Those who are realistic; they know how to sort things out: “He puts things in the right place.”
- Those who solve problems; they do not let them pile up: “For example, you have a medical problem. O.K. Which options do you have? A resilient person goes for counselling.”
- Those who are organised and rational: “I think that being organised means you are resilient. If you have a problem, you solve it. You do not let emotions prevail.”

The parents described resilient children s well-balanced, able to deal with failure, confident, curious, and have developed conflict resolution skills.

The children said that resilient persons have many friends and are nice persons. When they are having a hard time, other children and adults in their surroundings can help them:

“My friends. They are good. They never beat each other; they care about each other, and help each other.”

“When you are good – it means you are hanging out with everyone and have a lot of friends.”

“My dad says: If you have many friends, you are rich. More friends – more happiness.”

When asked what could help them when they have a hard time, children said things like:

“If we have a fight, we make up, give each other a high five.”

“You should talk to an adult. Adults know what to do.”

“If someone is shy, you invite him to play with you. Or ask your mother to tell his/her mother to invite him/her to your birthday.”

“The teacher can explain to her...that there is no reason to be shy.”

“They can learn from their mother and father how to be good.”

The conversation with children did not last long, because they were losing concentration and wanted to play. We could not gather enough data from the children to complete a thematic map. For this reason, we made a thematic map of what makes people resilient only for adults (parents and teachers). We asked the teachers and parents what would increase their resilience. The teachers mentioned things like:

“A preschool teacher knows a lot and has a lot of skills – singing, dancing, maths, art, nature....sometimes we work 18 hours a day.”

“We expect support and appreciation. We need concrete help, not theory.”

“Parents also do not see us as experts, but as babysitters, but we cannot allow parents not to respect us.”

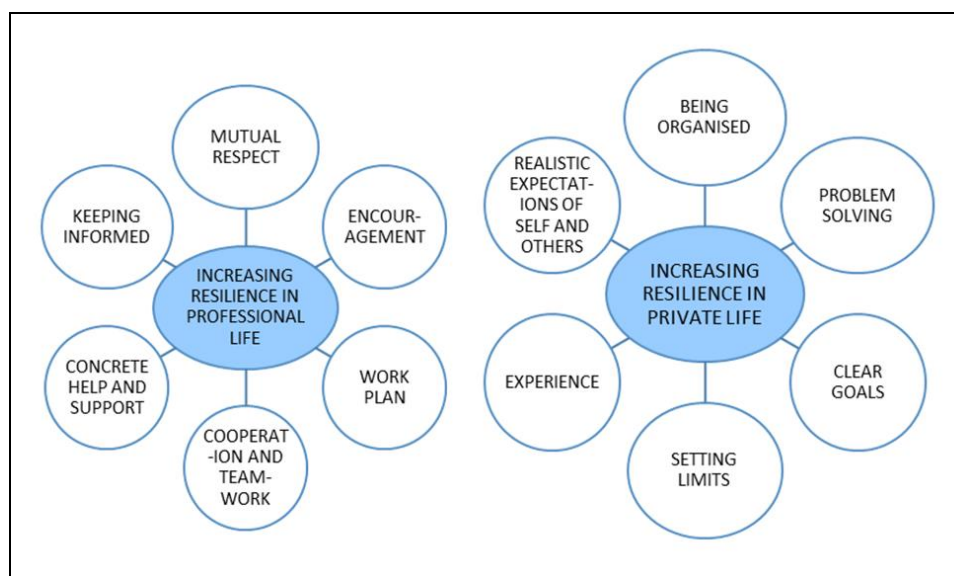
“We should work as a team, support each other.”

Parents said mentioned the following factors:

“There is too much information and expectations from us. Sometimes the choice is too big. I have (learnt) to be more organised.”

“You have to be experienced. Only with the third child did I learn when he is hungry, when sad, when tired...”

The themes that emerged are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Thematic map of what makes people more resilient (teachers and parents)**

#### *Analysis of quantitative data*

In this part of the research, children’s resilience was assessed by teachers and parents to compare how it varied according to the significant persons in children’s microsystems. The data collected were grouped using the factors from the scale defined by Tatalović Vorkapić and Lončarić (2014) and analysed descriptively (Table II).

The data presented in Table II show that parents, in comparison with teachers, assess all aspects of children’s resilience more positively. According to the parents’ assessments, self-control is the most developed aspect of children’s resilience, while their ability to enjoy exploration is their least developed aspect. Teachers consider that the children’s most developed aspects of resilience, are their ability to make social contact and their social performance, and they agree with the parents’ assessments on the children’s relatively less developed ability to enjoy exploration. Parents’ assessments are, in comparison with those of teachers, much more uniform. Table II suggests that teachers’ and parents’ assessments differ significantly in four of the five resilience aspects. There is no difference in making contact and social performance, but



parents' scores are significantly higher in self-control, assertiveness, emotional stability/coping with stress and taking pleasure in exploration.

**Table II. Assessment of children's resilience by teachers and parents**

Resilience factor	Teachers' assessments				Parents' assessments				T-test	p*
	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max		
Making contact/ Social performance	3.99	.842	1.63	5	4.04	.531	2.50	5	-0.619	.537
Self-control	3.89	.792	1.88	5	4.35	.485	2.75	5	-5.520	.000
Assertiveness	3.77	.821	1.50	5	4.14	.511	2.14	5	-4.507	.000
Emotional stability/Coping with stress	3.73	1.000	1.20	5	4.10	.596	1.20	5	-4.064	.000
Pleasure in exploration	3.43	.432	2.33	4.22	3.65	.374	2.78	4.56	-4.468	.000

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; \*p ≤ .005

There are also significant differences between teachers' and parents' evaluations regarding the influence of the child's age on resilience development (Table III, Table IV). As shown in Table III, older children are assessed by teachers as more resilient in four of five aspects. The only exception is self-control which the teachers assessed as approximately equal in all three groups of children according to age. On the other hand, according to the parents' assessments, the child's age has an influence on their making contact and social performance, assertiveness, and emotional stability (Table IV). We found no significant difference between teachers' and parents' assessment of resilience in relation to children's gender

**Table III. Differences in the assessment of children's resilience by age – teachers' assessment**

Resilience factor	Age 7 & 6		Age 5 & 4		Age 3 & 2		T-test	p*
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Making contact/Social performance	4.11	.756	3.91	.891	3.00	.958	8.111	.001
Self-control	3.95	.799	3.81	.835	3.57	.590	1.065	.348
Assertiveness	3.91	.760	3.62	.735	2.78	.917	9.301	.000
Emotional stability/Coping with stress	3.93	.891	3.49	.776	2.24	1.157	15.270	.000
Pleasure in exploration	3.49	.404	3.35	.439	2.99	.439	6.615	.002

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; \*p ≤ .005

**Table IV. Differences in the assessment of children's resilience by age – parents' assessment**

Resilience factor	Age 7 & 6		Age 5 & 4		Age 3 & 2		T-test	p*
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Making contact/Social performance	4.11	.477	4.04	.495	3.40	.723	8.013	.001
Self-control	4.37	.481	4.24	.537	4.44	.415	.760	.470
Assertiveness	4.16	.532	4.08	.477	3.55	1.067	8.911	.000
Emotional stability/Coping with stress	4.16	.532	4.08	.477	3.55	1.067	4.409	.014
Pleasure in exploration	3.65	.373	3.73	.323	3.46	.460	1.663	.194

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; \* $p \leq .050$

## Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative data shows that participants of all groups (children, teachers and parents) see resilience as something positive, which contradicts the data of some Croatian authors who found that for some resilience has negative connotations (Mataga Tintor, 2013). It also suggests that participants see resilience as relating both to personal factors, such as actively dealing with problems and to environmental factors that include relationships with colleagues at work, friends or family members, etc. (Herrman et al., 2011).

In the children's opinion resilient individuals have developed social skills and a wide network of support. When talking about what makes for an easy time in kindergarten, the children were mostly geared towards good relationships with friends. To increase resilience they lean on adults in their microsystem, both parents and teachers. In the children's opinion, adults could be mediators in certain situations. They could also be models for appropriate behaviour, which makes things easier for children. This study is one of the few studies on the resilience of young children (Hill et al, 2007), making use of both of children's voice and mixed methods design that contextualises children' experiences "through the combination of both numbers and voices" (Santos, 2012, p. 7)

Qualitative analysis on what enhances resilience shows that teachers' opinions on increasing resilience only partially overlap with those of parents. This difference can be explained by the teachers' professional viewpoint, and the parents' private, familial point of view. The important aspects of professional life according to teachers are concrete help and support that teachers can receive from each other or from the kindergarten's team of experts, mutual respect and appreciation, and building motivation – encouragement, keeping informed, cooperation – teamwork and creating a work plan. The latter is similar to being well organised, a characteristic mentioned by parents. Parents' resilience is increased by: experience, problem solving (instead of passivity and despair), clear parental goals, setting limits in the child's upbringing, and having realistic expectations of self and others. Problem solving is among the most important features of resilient families, as stated by Sheridan, Sjuts and Coutts (2013). Teachers say resilient persons are able to

endure more stress. Herbert (2005) cites Luthar who suggests that stressors can actually increase competence if the stress levels are not too high. This is similar to the findings of Obradović (2016) that show that mild-to-moderate exposure to family adversity encouraged children to apply and practise their emotion-regulation skills.

According to our quantitative data, the perceived level of children's resilience in an institutional environment (kindergarten) and in a family environment is not the same. Rautiainen et al. (2015) found the same in research with school children, the parents' views of children's resilience was more positive than the teachers' views. It is possible that the criteria for assessing resilience are not the same for teachers and for parents. It is not unusual for parents to perceive their children as more resilient than the teachers do. Children feel safer at home, because adults take care only of their children (sometimes this is a single child), while in the kindergarten/school, the children may have to compete more for attention (there are up to 25 children in Croatian kindergartens). Such circumstances indicate the need for communication between teachers and parents about these aspects of the child's social and emotional development.

According to the model of Sheridan and Kratochwill (2007), the family-school connection could either be traditional or it could promote partnership. Partnership implies frequent and continuous cooperation and communication between parents and teachers. In the case of preschool children, such a collaborative partnership is easier to establish, because parents and preschool teachers communicate on a daily basis when parents take children to and from kindergarten. Still, the home and kindergarten contexts are not the same, and the child's behaviour varies in different circumstances. Furthermore, teachers are responsible for the whole group, while parents are only responsible for their children. Fefer and Lauterbach (2017) examined how parents and teachers each define learners' success and found that while parents focus on the individual child and the child's social and emotional competence, well-being and growth, teachers focus on the whole class and characteristics such as academic skills, self-advocacy and mastery.

It is expected that the child's resilience changes with age (Herrman et al, 2011), but there was an absence of statistically significant differences in the child's age in relation to self-control (in both parents' and teachers' assessments) and pleasure in exploration (in the parents' assessments). In their meta-analysis of empirical studies on children's resilience in the face of maltreatment, Nasvytiene, Lazdauskas and Leonavičiene (2012, p.19) found that "empirical evidence does not support a linear increase of resilience with the child's age".

In the study by Howell et al. (2010), gender had no effect on resilience outcomes. During the standardisation of the Scale of Socio-emotional Wellbeing and Resilience in Preschool Children in Croatia, Tatalović Vorkapić and Lončarić (2014) determined that resilience varies according to the children's age and gender, with older female children being more resilient. The results of our study are not consistent with these findings, which may be a consequence of the convenience sample used.

There are limitations in our study related to the children's answers on what is resilience. Since resilience is an abstract term for preschool children, we could not expect them to discuss the various aspects of resilience, as we did with the adults. There is an additional limitation concerning the interest, motivation and concentration of young children aged 5-6 years when participating in focus groups. Moreover, quieter

children could not be easily heard in the group setting. In future, research interviews and other developmentally appropriate tools need are recommended with young children.

While thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, there are also potential limitations when using this method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Researchers have to identify themes within the data, consider all the data and then develop themes. It might happen that some relevant data are lost in this process. Team work or peer supervision would improve the thematic analysis.

## Conclusion

The qualitative data of our research show that parents and teachers have different views on what defines resilience. Both groups perceive resilience as something positive, but teachers are more context oriented (cooperation, concrete help and support, etc.), while parents emphasise more personal characteristics, such as activity rather than passivity, realistic expectations of self and others, which could help them increase resilience. Children find the help and guidance of adults very helpful in increasing resilience. Our quantitative data show that parents evaluate all aspects of children's resilience more positively than teachers.

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