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A Case Study of Post-Secondary Educators' and Students' Perspectives on Skills and Pedagogical Approaches to Foster Greater Academic Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the views of twelve post-secondary students and twelve educators in a post-secondary school in Malta regarding the skills necessary to manage academic stressors, particularly those stemming from workloads and deadlines. Employing a qualitative, inductive methodology, the research utilised semi-structured interviews and focus groups to identify and categorise these skills within the framework of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. Participants identified problem-focused strategies including time management, problem-solving, adaptability, and self-efficacy, as well as emotion-focused strategies such as emotional regulation and emotional intelligence, cognitive reframing, a growth mindset, and mindfulness. The findings portray the importance of implementing metacognitive skills within the curriculum, thereby equipping students with practical tools to build resilience and navigate academic challenges more effectively. In addition, the study offers practical recommendations for educators and school leaders to foster supportive educational environments that nurture both resilience and wellbeing. These insights contribute to the wider discourse on student support, highlighting how this Maltese post-secondary school might better prepare learners for the rigours of higher education and the professional world. The research concludes by recommending future studies to investigate the long-term outcomes of resilience-building interventions in this post-secondary setting.

1. Introduction

This study was conducted in Malta, a small island with a population of around half a million. It examines the views of 16 to 18-year-old students and educators at the post-secondary level regarding the skills students need to manage workloads and deadlines effectively. The research was carried out in a post-secondary school that offers academic rather than vocational programmes. Education here is provided free of charge, and students receive a monthly stipend to support their continued studies beyond their compulsory education. The post-secondary sector in Malta enrolled approximately 10,399 students for the academic year 203-2024 (NSO,

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2025). Of these, 84.2% attended state-run post-secondary institutions, with 55.7% attending vocational schools.

This study builds on a previous empirical case study that explored wellbeing among academic post-secondary students, guided by Bradburn's (1969) theory of subjective wellbeing. According to Bradburn, wellbeing results from a balance between positive and negative factors. Positive factors generate positive emotions that enhance wellbeing, while negative factors lead to negative emotions that diminish it. The earlier study found that workloads and deadlines were the primary negative factors affecting students' wellbeing, with students suggesting that reducing these academic stressors would improve their overall experience (Ebejer Grech, 2024).

To better understand the workloads and deadlines identified as perceived negative factors in the previous study, it is essential to consider the structure of the Matriculation Certificate (MC) Course undertaken by Maltese academic post-secondary students. Typically, students select two subjects at Advanced Level (A-Level) and three at Intermediate Level, in addition to a compulsory subject known as Systems of Knowledge (SOK). The curriculum is predominantly theoretical, with practical sessions limited to just two or few hours per week and offered only in specific subjects like Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Home Economics, Art, Physical Education and similar subjects. As illustrated in Table 1, which outlines the weekly timetable of a typical student, they engage with approximately 14 teachers weekly. Each teacher assigns study material, homework, and periodic tests, contributing to a significant academic workload. This workload intensifies during major examination periods, including the half-yearly exams in February and the end-of-year exams in June, requiring students to thoroughly review all topics covered by their teachers. The demands further escalate in preparation for the final MATSEC examinations at the end of the two-year course (MEDE, 2017), underscoring the substantial academic pressures students face throughout their studies.

Table 1. A typical students' timetable

Lesson number	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	Chemistry Teacher 1	Chemistry Teacher 4	SOK Teacher 10	Biology practical Teacher 13	Chemistry Teacher 4
2	Biology Teacher 2	Biology Teacher 6	Chemistry Teacher 1	Biology practical Teacher 13	Biology Teacher 9
3	Chemistry practical Teacher 3	SOK Teacher 7	Biology Teacher 2	Physics Teacher 11	Free lesson
4	Chemistry practical Teacher 3	Psychology Teacher 8	Free lesson	Biology Teacher 9	Psychology Teacher 8
5	Chemistry Teacher 4	Free	Physics Teacher 11	Chemistry Teacher 1	Physics Teacher 11
6	Biology Teacher 2	Biology Teacher 9	Free lesson	English Teacher 5	Chemistry Teacher 3
7	English Teacher 5	English Teacher 5	SOK Teacher 12	SOK Teacher 14	Psychology Teacher 8

After careful consideration and extensive reflection on the complexities of workloads, deadlines and student wellbeing, it became evident that while reducing academic demands may offer temporary relief from these perceived stressors and create the illusion that the school is fostering greater wellbeing, a more holistic approach is required. Post-secondary schools must consider the broader perspective, one that prioritises not just immediate wellbeing but also equips students with the resilience needed to navigate increasing workloads and deadlines as they transition to university, alternative higher education, or the workplace, while simultaneously fostering their own wellbeing despite these challenges. This approach ensures that students, who will eventually become the country's workforce, are better prepared for the demands of the future. Therefore, this study aimed to identify strategies to enhance students' resilience in managing workloads and deadlines effectively.

A participatory research approach was central to this investigation, engaging students as key contributors who provided authentic insights into their experiences (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The study also incorporated educators' perspectives, acknowledging their pivotal role in shaping the educational environment and fostering students' personal development. By integrating these viewpoints, the research sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the school can better equip students to navigate future academic and professional challenges.

1.1. Research Questions

1. What skills do Maltese post-secondary students and educators identify as essential for managing academic workloads and deadlines effectively?
2. What actionable recommendations can be developed collaboratively for embedding resilience-building strategies into the curriculum?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Resilience in Education

Resilience in education is defined as students' ability to adapt to and overcome challenges, setbacks, and stressors in academic contexts while maintaining their wellbeing and achieving their goals (Dobson et al., 2023). Academic resilience, in this context, pertains to students' capacity to manage stressors such as workloads and deadlines by fostering personal attributes. Cassidy (2015) highlights that students who perceive themselves as capable are better equipped to manage stress and maintain academic performance, reinforcing the importance of focusing on personal skills.

2.2. Local Studies

The *Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education in Malta and Gozo* (MEDE, 2017) identified a critical gap in post-secondary education: the reliance on extensive subject syllabi and a predominantly lecture-based teaching approach. This "one-size-fits-all" model (MEDE, 2017, p. 28), they argued, inadequately addresses the diverse needs of learners at this stage. Among the unmet needs highlighted were the development of critical personal skills, including adaptability, emotional regulation, and problem-solving, skills essential for fostering resilience against academic stressors (MEDE, 2017).

The report called for a paradigm shift, advocating for a more holistic approach to education that prioritises personal growth and resilience over rote academic content and exam preparation (MEDE, 2017). It proposed curriculum reforms, such as modular design, which would allow

for greater flexibility and provide students with opportunities to manage their learning more sustainably while cultivating essential life skills. Similarly, a recent editorial by *Times of Malta* (2024) echoed these concerns, emphasising the importance of integrating resilience training and emotional intelligence into post-secondary curricula. The editorial highlighted a critical disconnect between academic learning and the practical skills employers seek, calling for an education system that prepares students to thrive in both academic and professional contexts.

This study seeks to address this critical gap by exploring how resilience can be cultivated among post-secondary students through the perspectives of both students and educators. It aligns with the *Maltese Education Strategy 2024–30*, which prioritises wellbeing as a central pillar alongside educational achievement (MEYR, 2023).

2.3. The Vital Role of Educators in Teaching Skills for Academic Resilience

Educators play a crucial role in fostering academic resilience by creating supportive learning environments and equipping students with essential coping skills. The MEDE (2017) report identified inadequate teacher training as a key barrier to resilience-building and recommended tailored professional development programmes to address this gap. Due to their close interactions with students, educators are well-positioned to observe and understand individual strengths and challenges, allowing them to provide personalised support and targeted interventions (Cassidy, 2015). Teachers can further promote key resilience-building skills, including time management, emotional regulation, and problem-solving, by integrating these concepts into daily lessons and modelling their application (Beale & Konstantinou, 2023; Jalalian-Chursky & Tausen, 2024).

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, originally developed in 1984 and refined over subsequent years (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1998). This theory offers a robust framework for understanding how individuals perceive and respond to stressors by emphasising the dynamic interplay between cognitive appraisal and coping strategies. According to the theory, stress arises when individuals appraise a situation as surpassing their available resources to manage it effectively, leading to an imbalance between perceived demands and coping capacity. This perspective highlights that stress is not merely a consequence of external events but is largely shaped by an individual's subjective interpretation and their chosen coping mechanisms (Lazarus, 1998).

To further enrich the study, metacognition is also considered an essential factor in shaping students' perceptions and responses to academic stressors (Flavell, 1976, 1979). Metacognition, or the ability to reflect on and regulate one's own cognitive processes, plays a critical role in how individuals assess and interpret challenges (Perry et al., 2019). By fostering metacognitive skills, students become more adept at evaluating their experiences, recognising their cognitive strengths and limitations, and adopting more effective coping strategies (Drigas & Mitsea, 2020). Integrating metacognitive awareness within Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping (1984), allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how students can develop resilience in the face of academic pressures.

2.5. Criticism and Limitations

Despite the strengths, the combined use of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework with metacognitive processes presents several limitations when applied to educational settings. One key criticism is the theory's focus on individual subjective appraisals of stress, which may

oversimplify the complexities of stress responses by overlooking systemic and contextual factors such as school policies, socio-economic challenges, and cultural influences (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Ungar, 2021). However, this study deliberately focuses on the skills that students and educators identify as effective in managing academic stressors. The findings have the potential to inform policy changes, fostering a more supportive academic environment. Another limitation is the theory's primary emphasis on cognitive processes, with limited consideration of environmental and systemic influences such as school practices, teacher-student relationships, and peer networks, which significantly impact students' resilience (Cefai, 2021). Nevertheless, the study acknowledges ongoing efforts by the school to promote positive relationships and collaborative peer networks.

A further challenge posed by the theory is the subjective nature of appraisals, which can complicate measurement and operationalisation. Self-reported data used to evaluate primary and secondary appraisals may be prone to bias and inaccuracies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, this study mitigates this limitation by employing a qualitative methodology that seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' and educators' perspectives rather than generalisable results. Future quantitative research could complement these findings by collecting data from a larger sample to enhance the study's validity and scope. Despite these limitations, Lazarus and Folkman's framework remains a valuable tool for exploring how students develop resilience through cognitive appraisals and coping strategies.

2.6. Coping Skills for Academic Resilience

Research highlights a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills that contribute to resilience, including time management, problem-solving abilities, emotional intelligence, adaptability, self-efficacy, and cognitive reframing (Martin & Marsh, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). These skills equip students with the capacity to manage stress, stay motivated, and persist in the face of academic challenges. By synthesising findings from various scholarly sources, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the key competencies that empower students to overcome obstacles and succeed in their academic pursuits.

2.6.1 Time Management

Time management is widely recognised as a crucial skill for enhancing academic resilience, enabling students to prioritise tasks, set realistic goals, and organise workloads efficiently (Alyami et al., 2021; Martin & Marsh, 2019). Effective time management strategies, such as breaking down larger tasks into smaller steps, utilising planning tools, and maintaining a structured schedule, allow students to better manage their academic responsibilities, ultimately boosting their confidence and productivity (Martin & Marsh, 2019). Given its importance, educators play a fundamental role in fostering these skills by incorporating time management training into the curriculum, equipping students with practical tools to handle academic demands successfully (Diab & Green, 2024).

2.6.2 Problem-Solving Skills

Problem-solving skills are fundamental to academic resilience, enabling students to systematically identify, evaluate, and implement effective solutions to challenges (Coskun et al., 2014). When combined with metacognitive strategies and cognitive flexibility, these skills enhance decision-making, adaptability, and the achievement of long-term academic goals (Cefai, 2021). Research suggests that students with strong problem-solving abilities demonstrate improved emotional regulation, greater academic engagement, and enhanced coping strategies (Cassidy, 2015; Modecki et al., 2017).

2.6.3 Adaptability

Adaptability is a key component of academic resilience, allowing students to manage changing demands, stay motivated, and persist through challenges (Ungar, 2021). It involves adjusting strategies and behaviours to suit evolving circumstances, with experiential learning playing a vital role in fostering this skill through project-based assignments (Cefai & Spiteri, 2020). Research indicates that adaptable students navigate academic transitions more effectively and perceive challenges as opportunities for growth. Moreover, educational interventions that focus on structured support systems and guided learning experiences can significantly enhance adaptability, preparing students for success in both academic and professional environments (Ungar, 2021).

The development of adaptability is strongly linked to Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which suggests that students learn best when provided with tasks that are slightly beyond their current abilities but achievable with the right support. Smagorinsky (2018) highlights that educators play a crucial role in guiding students through this learning process, providing scaffolding to help them progressively build skills and confidence. Muntasir and Akbar (2023) further argue that scaffolding is an effective technique for fostering adaptability, as it encourages students to extend their learning capabilities within their ZPD, ultimately promoting self-directed learning and resilience.

2.6.4 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks, is a key factor in academic resilience. Rooted in Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, self-efficacy influences students' motivation, persistence, and approach to challenges. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to perceive obstacles as opportunities for learning, adopt proactive strategies, and remain engaged in demanding academic settings (Radhamani & Kalaivani, 2021). Cassidy (2015) found that students with strong self-efficacy were better at recovering from academic setbacks, while Kim and Hodges (2023) demonstrated that self-efficacy positively correlates with resilience and stress management, further reinforcing its role in sustaining academic success.

2.6.5 Emotional Regulation and Emotional Intelligence

Emotional regulation is a fundamental component of academic resilience, enabling students to recognise and manage negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety. Metacognition plays a crucial role in fostering emotional regulation, as it helps students develop self-awareness and employ strategies to control their emotions effectively (Gross, 2015). Students with strong emotional regulation skills can navigate academic challenges without allowing stress to negatively impact their performance, contributing to overall academic success (Atkins & Muscat-Inglott, 2023; Jalalian-Chursky & Tausen, 2024). Techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive reframing, and deep breathing have been shown to help students maintain emotional balance and enhance resilience in high-pressure academic environments (Cefai, 2021).

2.6.6 Cognitive Reframing

Cognitive reframing, also known as cognitive restructuring, is a psychological technique attainable through metacognition, enabling individuals to consciously assess and modify their thought processes. By altering their interpretations of situations, individuals can adjust their emotional responses, reduce stress, and foster psychological resilience. This approach enhances personal control and emotional wellbeing by transforming negative self-perceptions

into positive, constructive ones. It is a core component of stress management and resilience-building strategies, particularly within educational settings (Wang & Yin, 2023).

According to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984; Lazarus, 1998), stress arises when individuals perceive a situation as exceeding their available coping resources. Within this framework, cognitive reframing serves as an adaptive coping mechanism by helping individuals reinterpret challenges in a more constructive manner, thereby reducing stress and promoting psychological resilience (Wang & Yin, 2023).

Furthermore, educators play a pivotal role in helping students recognise and challenge maladaptive thoughts, guiding them toward healthier cognitive and emotional responses in the face of academic pressure. Structured interventions that incorporate cognitive reframing techniques in educational settings can empower students to develop resilience, manage stress effectively, and enhance their problem-solving abilities in academic and professional contexts (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

2.6.7 Growth Mindset

Cultivating a growth mindset, the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and perseverance, is a key emotion-focused strategy for fostering academic resilience. Metacognition plays a crucial role in cultivating a growth mindset by enabling students to monitor their learning processes and adjust their approaches accordingly (Dweck, 2016). According to Dweck (2016), students with a growth mindset perceive failures as learning opportunities rather than barriers, which encourages persistence and motivation in achieving academic goals. When combined with intrinsic motivation, driven by internal satisfaction rather than external rewards, this mindset further enhances students' ability to overcome challenges and remain engaged (Kim & Hodges, 2023).

2.6.8 Mindfulness

Mindfulness, defined as maintaining non-judgmental awareness of the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), plays a crucial role in fostering academic resilience by enhancing self-regulation and emotional awareness. It helps students manage academic challenges with greater composure and focus, reducing stress and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms essential for academic success (Zhang et al., 2024; Jalalian-Chursky & Tausen, 2024). Mindfulness practices such as meditation, body scanning, and mindful breathing provide practical tools to mitigate anxiety, improve cognitive flexibility, and sustain attention on long-term academic goals (Cefai, 2021). Atkins and Muscat-Inglott (2023) observed that higher mindfulness levels among Maltese undergraduates correlated with greater affective wellbeing and resilience.

2.7. Critiques of Academic Resilience Training

Academic resilience training equips students with problem-focused and emotion-focused skills such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, and problem-solving, enabling them to effectively manage academic stressors like workloads and deadlines (Cassidy, 2015; Kim & Hodges, 2023). These programmes support students' wellbeing and adaptability to academic demands (Jalalian-Chursky & Tausen, 2024). However, a key criticism of resilience training is its tendency to place excessive responsibility on students while overlooking broader systemic factors that influence resilience, such as socioeconomic conditions and institutional support (Sandoval-Hernández & Białowolski, 2016).

To address this concern, resilience-building efforts should extend beyond individual skill development to include systemic reforms, such as flexible curricula and accessible mental

health services. Resilience programmes should be integrated with mental health support to ensure that students facing significant psychological challenges receive appropriate professional assistance (Ross et al., 2023).

A collaborative approach involving educators, schools, and policymakers is essential for the success of resilience training. Educators can support students by modelling resilience and fostering supportive learning environments, while policies promoting equitable resource allocation can further enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives (MEDE, 2017).

Furthermore, holistic education models that incorporate resilience training alongside socio-emotional learning (SEL), creativity, and critical thinking provide a more balanced and sustainable approach to student development (Durlak et al., 2011). Such models prevent resilience training from masking systemic challenges and instead position it as a tool for empowerment and personal growth.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative inductive approach to explore the perspectives of educators and students on the essential skills required to manage academic workloads and deadlines. Rooted in an interpretivist epistemological stance, the research prioritises the exploration of subjective experiences and acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent (Lyu, 2024; Saunders et al., 2012).

3.1. Research Tools

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection tool, enabling the researcher to be guided enough to ask all the information needed for this study, but flexible enough to allow the participants to openly express their views while providing an in-depth exploration of the complexities (Saunders et al., 2012) surrounding academic resilience. The questions were developed based on literature relating to academic resilience, stress appraisal, and coping strategies.

3.2. Sampling Size

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers working at the post-secondary school where this study was conducted and with 12 students. These were followed by two focus groups, each comprising six educators and six students selected from the initial interview participants. During these sessions, the data gathered from the interviews were discussed, allowing for further analysis and the co-construction of plans and recommendations to address the identified challenges.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of participants with diverse and relevant insights into the skills needed for academic resilience. Twelve educators were selected from a range of subject areas, including Philosophy, Psychology, Biology, Maltese, English, Systems of Knowledge, Physics, Economics, Marketing, and Chemistry. Their ages ranged from 32 to 51 years, and they had between three and twenty years of teaching experience within the post-secondary school, ensuring a wide spectrum of perspectives shaped by different disciplinary and professional backgrounds. The student sample comprised twelve learners drawn from first-year, second-year, and repeating cohorts, aged between 16 and 18 years, and enrolled in varied subject combinations. This heterogeneity enabled the study to capture a

cross-section of academic experiences, levels of study, and disciplinary expectations. Participants were invited via an email disseminated by the school administration, and those who volunteered were selected based on their ability to articulate their views clearly and contribute meaningfully to discussions on academic resilience. Despite the potential limitations of qualitative research, such as subjectivity and limited generalisability, purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant insights, enhancing the depth and richness of the data (Saunders et al., 2012).

3.4. Data Saturation

Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently to ensure that saturation of codes and themes were reached. These emerged during the last three interviews with teachers and last four interviews with students. The number of participants reflected a comprehensive range of perspectives relevant to the research questions.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Different strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness.

3.5.1 Member checking

Member checking was carried out after transcription, whereby all participants were invited to review and verify the accuracy of their interview or focus-group transcript. This process enabled participants to confirm or clarify their statements and ensured that their perspectives were authentically represented, thereby strengthening the credibility of the data.

3.5.2 Intercoder Reliability

To improve dependability, the supervisor of the student (researcher) conducting this study independently coded some of the transcripts and checked all the work. This double-checking enabled a more robust examination of code application across different participant types.

3.6. Ethical Guidelines

The research process adhered to ethical guidelines, with formal permissions obtained from the school, and participants were provided with clear information regarding the study's aims and their rights. Measures to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, such as member checking and audit trails, were implemented to ensure the credibility of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research underscores the importance of ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and data security, aligning with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Parliament and Council, 2018).

3.7. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework. The process began with repeated reading of transcripts and the writing of initial analytic memos to support familiarisation. Line-by-line coding was undertaken using both semantic codes (capturing explicit meanings) and latent codes (reflecting underlying assumptions or values). Codes were then collated into provisional clusters, which served as the foundation for preliminary theme development.

To illustrate analytic transparency, an extract of the initial codebook is provided below:

Table 2. Expert from the coding process

Initial Code	Description	Example of Extract	Provisional Theme
Breaking tasks down	Students describe dividing assignments into smaller components	"Break it down into small parts so it's not overwhelming"	Time Management (Problem-Focused Strategy)
Needing emotional control	Expression of difficulty managing emotions under stress	"When I panic, I can't start my work"	Emotional Regulation
Teacher guidance needed	Requests for structured support	"Teachers should guide us step by step, not leave us stuck"	Problem-Solving Support
Belief in ability	Statements of confidence or lack thereof	"If I try, I know I can get it done"	Self-Efficacy
Seeing failure as learning	Reframing setbacks positively	"Even if I get it wrong, it's a learning step"	Growth Mindset

3.8. Reflexive Journaling

A reflexive journal was maintained to mitigate the researcher's dual role as a teacher and researcher. It was used to bracket assumptions, document decision-making, and mitigate the researcher's bias as much as possible.

3.9. Methodological Limitations

Recognising the qualitative nature of the study, the relatively small sample does not permit transferability. Additionally, the dual role of the researcher also as a teacher, might have influenced participant responses despite reflexive safeguards. However, credibility strategies such as the ones described and the triangulation through interviews and focus groups, intercoder checks, and member validation, were used to mitigate the limitations as much as possible.

4. Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the data gathered from both educators and students revealed a striking similarity in the skills they identified as essential for fostering academic resilience. Time management emerged as the most frequently mentioned skill, followed by problem-solving skills, emotional regulation and emotional intelligence, growth mindset, adaptability and self-efficacy. These skills were subsequently presented to participants during the focus group discussions, where they were asked to confirm their agreement and propose how to classify them according to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (1984). It was agreed on a classification as shown in Table 3. Subsequently, they were asked to work together to propose strategies and initiatives for integrating these skills into the school curriculum. Eventually, the work of both focus groups was analysed and compiled as presented in this section.

Table 3. Problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies

Problem-Focused Strategies	Emotion-Focused Strategies
Time management	Emotional regulation and emotional intelligence
Problem-solving skills	Cognitive reframing

Adaptability	Growth mindset
Self-efficacy	Mindfulness

4.1. Problem-Focused Strategies

4.1.1 Time Management.

Both educators and students consistently highlighted time management as a critical skill for handling academic demands. One student expressed the importance of organisational skills in time management by stating:

> *"Writing down a list of work that has to be done on a diary and do a timetable or a schedule to try to get them done on time. Also, time management, so as not to procrastinate or leave tasks for the last minute, and be able to focus on a target, to be determined that if you have work to be done, you are determined to do it without excuses. Sort of self-discipline" (Student 11).*

This response aligns with the recommendations presented by Calonia et al. (2023), which emphasise effective time management, prioritising urgent work, avoiding procrastination, focusing on important tasks, maintaining work-life balance, and balancing socialisation for academic success. During the focus groups, students and educators suggested strategies such as guiding students to break down complex assignments into smaller, manageable steps and prioritising tasks to ensure a balance between academic and personal life. Research supports these recommendations, with MacCann et al. (2012) reporting that students with effective time management skills experience lower stress levels and higher academic achievement.

4.1.2 Problem-Solving Skills

Problem-solving was another highly ranked skill that students and educators considered essential for academic resilience. A student underscored the importance of guided problem-solving:

> *"By giving students challenging tasks and guiding them to break down the problem into simple manageable parts. Teachers should not give students a problem and leave them struggling by themselves but offer guidance as not to have the student get disheartened" (Student 7).*

Educators proposed incorporating collaborative projects and experiential learning to develop students' problem-solving capabilities. This aligns with the findings of Durlak et al. (2011), which suggest that structured problem-solving interventions can prepare students to navigate academic challenges with greater ease. However, students proposed one-to-one help during specifically dedicated contact hours during which students can benefit from private mentoring during school hours.

Problem-solving skills are encouraged by the Maltese strategy for education 2024-30 (MEYR, 2023) that describes how these are necessary to prepare students to succeed in the ever-evolving world. Such skills enable students adapt to new conditions and find effective solutions to complex unexpected situations even later in life when they are on the workplace.

4.1.3 Adaptability

Adaptability was identified as a crucial factor in helping students cope with evolving academic demands. Ungar (2021) suggests that adaptable students are more likely to remain motivated

and resilient when facing challenges. One educator described adaptability as essential in adjusting to new academic expectations, stating:

> *"Educators can help students by giving them the right kind of support. They can analyse what a student knows and what they need to learn next. Then, they can give tasks that are just a bit harder than what the student can do on their own, but still possible with some help" (Educator 9).*

This student articulated very well Lev Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development. Educators recommended incorporating project-based learning according to the student's capability, always encouraging them to extend their zone of proximal development. They also proposed more experiential learning where possible, as an effective tool for cultivating adaptive skills in students Cefai and Spiteri (2020).

4.1.4 Self-Efficacy

Findings revealed that many students were unfamiliar with the term "self-efficacy," as indicated by responses such as "I don't know what this means." Others replied: "believing in myself", "to be efficient", "to try to be yourself", and one replied "to be more intelligent". When asked how a student can practice self-efficacy, most referred to practices like improving studying skills, time management, avoiding procrastination, not wasting time, therapy sessions, self-reflection, and other unrelated explanations. These answers indicate that students are generally unaware of the terminology "self-efficacy". It is crucial for educators to recognise this lack of knowledge among the students with whom they strive to increase resilience.

Educators acknowledged the need for awareness-raising initiatives to familiarise students with self-efficacy concepts and foster resilience through guided experiences and feedback.

4.2. Emotion-Focused Strategies for Academic Resilience

Emotion-focused strategies were also considered integral to enhancing resilience, as they help students manage their emotional reactions to stressors. These strategies were regarded as vital in fostering a positive learning environment.

4.2.1 Emotional Intelligence

The findings from this study indicate that students have a basic understanding of emotional intelligence, associating it with the ability to recognise and manage emotions effectively. When asked how individuals can develop emotional intelligence, students suggested self-reflection, regulating their emotions, and learning from past experiences:

> *"Reflecting on your emotions and how you acted that day and improving on your actions so you won't make the same mistakes if you did any" (Student 4).*

These responses align with Goleman's (2011) framework, which highlights self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills as key components of emotional intelligence that contribute to resilience and effective stress management. Trigueros et al. (2020) further support this, arguing that students with higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage academic stress, cope with setbacks, and sustain focus on long-term goals.

Educators also acknowledged their crucial role in fostering emotional intelligence among students. They emphasised the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment, where students feel safe to monitor their emotions and develop coping mechanisms, echoing the findings of Bledsoe and Baskin (2014). However, educators also expressed the need for

targeted teacher training to help them identify signs of student anxiety and implement active learning strategies that promote emotional resilience.

4.2.2 Cognitive Reframing

From this study's findings, cognitive reframing emerged as another significant strategy in fostering academic resilience. While students were generally unfamiliar with the term, they acknowledged the importance of reframing negative thoughts into constructive ones as a method of stress management. This process is closely linked to metacognition, which enables students to assess and modify their thought patterns, allowing them to adjust their emotional responses to academic stressors (Wang & Yin, 2023).

Teachers who participated in this study agreed that guiding students in identifying, challenging, and reframing their negative thought patterns is essential for fostering resilience. This perspective is supported by Yeager & Dweck (2012), who argue that structured interventions in the classroom can equip students with cognitive reframing techniques that improve their ability to navigate academic challenges with greater confidence and emotional stability. Educators emphasised that by helping students reframe setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures, they can cultivate a mindset that encourages persistence and proactive problem-solving. However, teachers emphasised the importance of specialised training to equip them with the necessary strategies to effectively integrate cognitive reframing into their teaching practices, ensuring that students develop this skill as part of their academic resilience.

4.2.3 Growth Mindset

When participants were asked whether they agreed that "resilient students tend to perceive obstacles as opportunities for learning rather than barriers," all responded affirmatively. When further questioned on how educators can cultivate a growth mindset, one educator stated:

> *"Educators can foster a growth mindset by emphasising effort over results, providing constructive feedback, modelling resilience, promoting challenges, celebrating progress, encouraging self-reflection, and creating a supportive learning environment" (Educator 1).*

This response aligns with Yeager and Dweck's (2012) concept of growth mindset, which asserts that abilities and intelligence can be developed through sustained effort and persistence. Educators play a crucial role in reinforcing this belief through structured interventions, including targeted feedback, resilience training, and reflective exercises, which have been shown to enhance students' motivation and academic perseverance (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

4.2.4 Mindfulness

The findings coincide with Kabat-Zinn's (2005) description that mindfulness practices improve emotional regulation and stress management among students. Participants identified deep breathing, meditation, and self-reflection as effective strategies for reducing stress and maintaining emotional balance. However, teachers acknowledged that the rigid structure of the syllabus leaves little room for integrating mindfulness practices during lessons. As focus group discussions progressed, both teachers and students collaboratively explored practical ways to seamlessly incorporate these skills across different subjects, ensuring that students could develop resilience and reframe challenges such as workloads and deadlines in a more constructive manner.

5. Conclusion

The findings and discussions of this study are presented in alignment with the research questions, focusing on the essential skills that students should develop to effectively manage academic pressures and the actionable recommendations for educators and school leaders to foster a supportive educational environment. The study revealed that both educators and students identified a core set of skills essential for fostering resilience, with time management emerging as the most frequently mentioned, followed by problem-solving skills, emotional regulation and emotional intelligence, growth mindset, adaptability, and self-efficacy. These skills were classified using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, categorising time management, problem-solving, adaptability, and self-efficacy as problem-focused strategies, while emotional regulation and intelligence, and growth mindset were classified as emotion-focused strategies.

Educators emphasised the need for targeted professional development to equip them with the skills to integrate these resilience-building strategies effectively. The study recommends embedding these skills into the curriculum through structured interventions, metacognitive strategies, and the creation of a supportive learning environment that empowers students to manage academic demands with confidence and emotional stability.

To support post-secondary students facing the pressures of academic workloads and deadlines, educators and students concluded with the following suggestions that incorporate all the identified skills:

1. Reflective Practices: Encouraging students to engage in reflection through journals or discussion prompts allows them to consider their thought processes, identify areas of difficulty, and develop personalised strategies to overcome obstacles (Perry et al., 2019).
2. Goal Setting and Self-Monitoring: Teaching students to set achievable goals, monitor progress, and adjust their strategies can foster a sense of accomplishment and reduce stress. This practice aligns with neuroplasticity, as repeated engagement in goal-setting strengthens neural pathways involved in planning and self-regulation (Yazar & Tolan, 2020).
3. Mindfulness Training: Mindfulness has been shown to enhance metacognitive awareness by increasing attention and emotional regulation, which are crucial for effective learning and mental health (Beer & Moneta, 2010). Introducing brief mindfulness exercises before classes can improve focus and reduce anxiety, preparing students to engage more fully with academic content.
4. Collaborative Learning: Engaging students in group activities promotes the social dimension of metacognition, where they can observe and discuss diverse thinking strategies. This not only enhances problem-solving skills but also reinforces the neural networks involved in empathy, collaboration, and adaptability (Brewer et al., 2021).
5. Self-Regulated Learning Interventions: Programmes that explicitly teach self-regulation techniques can empower students to manage time effectively, plan their studies, and address setbacks constructively. As these practices become habits, they reinforce resilience and promote lifelong learning (Brewer et al., 2021).

It was emphasised that highly trained educators are instrumental in this regard. Education is one of the pillars that provides the right jobs for the economic needs of the nation (MEYR, 2023). Education shapes the overall development of citizens and impacts the trajectory of their lives in various ways (MEYR, 2023), hence continuous professional development for educators is of utmost importance.

For these reasons, the nation prioritises quality education through multiple mechanisms as highlighted in the document titled *Visioning the Future by Transforming Education*, in which Hon. Dr Clifton Grima, the Maltese Minister for Education, Sport, Youth, Research, and Innovation, stresses that education drives the progress of society by shaping minds to equip people to deal with challenges and opportunities (MEYR, 2023). This study showed how post-secondary educators and students align with Dr Grima's views of the dynamic nature of the world and the evolving needs of citizens, by acknowledging that need for growth mindset. Dr Grima further encourages forward-thinking education that empowers students, educators and schools to flourish in the 21st century (MEYR, 2023).

In the mentioned document, the second pillar, *Educational Achievement*, aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). SDG4, an initiative proposed by UNESCO's education sector, aims to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education and foster lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (UNESCO, n.d.). Motivated by these principles, this study examined educators' and students' perspectives and suggestions about skills that increase resilience. Resilience requires new ways of thinking. By linking to the theoretical framework that guided this study, it facilitates innovative approaches to combining risks and assets for planning, and new methods of collaborative problem-solving to advance resilience-based research and policy. Consequently, participants recognised the importance of time management, self-efficacy, adaptability, emotional regulation and emotional intelligence, and growth mindset. Given that educators are deemed instrumental for such successful endeavours, this study highlights the importance of continuous professional development for educators, who play a crucial role in fostering resilience in students.

5.1. Limitations of this Study

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research relied on a qualitative methodology with a relatively small sample size. Additionally, the subjective nature of self-reported data introduces potential biases, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may have been influenced by their perceptions of the researcher.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach to triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative data, enhancing the reliability and generalisability of findings. Additionally, exploring the impact of digital interventions and technology-based solutions, such as mobile apps for time management and mindfulness, could provide innovative strategies to support students' academic resilience.

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