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Navigating the paradox between professional challenges and teacher well-being: The role of strategies within the resilience process

Isabelle Krummenacher[1], Tina Hascher[1] Caroline Mansfield[2], Susan Beltman[3]Julia Mori[1] & Irene Guidon[1],

[1] Universität Bern, Switzerland
[2] Edith Cowan University, Australia
[3] Curtin University, Australia

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Abstract

Teaching is an immensely complex profession that often requires managing multiple and varied professional challenges. Despite these challenges, teachers tend to report moderate to high levels of well-being. This qualitative study explored this paradox by investigating the professional challenges reported and the coping strategies Swiss teachers use to support their well-being. Relational problem-solving was identified as a commonly used strategy when professional challenges occur. The unique contribution of this study lies in its further elucidation of the complex relationship between teachers' professional challenges and well-being embedded in a resilience process. The results of this study provide implications for understanding how to support teachers' resilience and to design interventions to enhance teachers' well-being.

Keywords: teacher professional challenges; teacher well-being; teacher resilience; teachers; teacher strategies

Corresponding author: Isabelle Krummenacher, Abteilung für Schul- und Unterrichtsforschung, Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft, Bern *isabelle.krummenacher@unibe.ch* *DOI: https://doi.org/10.14786/flr.v12i4.1211*

1. Introduction

Teacher shortages, teacher stress, and a high attrition rate have become critical areas of concern and a focus of research because of the important societal role of teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Viac & Fraser, 2020). It is well known that teaching is an immensely complex profession, particularly when job demands are high and in challenging situations. Nevertheless, it is also well known that many teachers feel well and thrive in their work and, despite high job demands, maintain their well-being, passion, engagement, and commitment (Hascher & Waber, 2021). How can this paradox between concurrent challenges and well-being be explained? Research has shown that one reason why teachers succeed and maintain their well-being despite high demands is teacher resilience (e.g. Li et al., 2019). Thus, resilience—defined as the process of drawing on a range of resources to navigate challenges and restore or improve well-being (Ungar, 2012)—seems to be a critical factor in teachers' professional lives. It has been found that the two dynamic and multidimensional constructs—teacher well-being and resilience—are used in various disciplines and research areas; they are often studied together (Hascher et al., 2021).

To better understand the relationship between resilience and well-being, the Aligning Well-being and Resilience in Education (AWaRE) model was developed (Hascher et al., 2021). The AWaRE model incorporates challenges and personal and contextual resources (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs as a personal resource and support by principals as a contextual resource) and illustrates how the resilience process restores well-being. Within this model, strategies are given a crucial role in supporting individuals in responding to professional challenges. However, the model does not explain how teachers cope with professional challenges or which coping strategies are applied and valuable to maintain their well-being. The frontline contribution of this study is thus (a) to explore the paradox of concurrent teacher professional challenges and teacher well-being; (b) to better understand the complex association between resilience and well-being; (c) to investigate empirically the role of strategies within a resilience process; and (d) to shed further light on some of the more nuanced strategies and processes that support well-being in teachers' professional life.

1.1 Professional challenges in teachers' work

Teaching is considered a highly demanding profession, and professional challenges can be manifold (Avidov-Ungar, 2018). For example, teachers can face professional challenges relating to students, colleagues, time stress, or workloads (Mansfield et al., 2014). Research on teachers' professional challenges can contribute to a better understanding of the profession and the requirements to succeed as a teacher. In their study, Kitching et al. (2009, p. 43) suggested that frequent "little issues" are more relevant to teachers' commitment, motivation, satisfaction, stress, burnout, and attrition than infrequent and severe issues. Professional challenges can trigger the resilience process in teachers.

These professional challenges can be structured within a social-ecological framework at the personal, relational, and organisational levels, because individuals develop, live, and act within numerous internally and externally interacting systems, as demonstrated by research on teacher resilience (Masten, 2014). Professional challenges at the organisational level include high workloads, limited time, scarce support (Flores, 2006), high responsibility (Johnson et al., 2014), the pressures of societal expectations (Schelvis et al., 2014), and policy changes (Gu & Day, 2013). Gu (2018) has suggested the governmental policy revisions can increase teachers' work stress, accountability responsibilities, and complexity. At the relational level, difficult relationships with students, parents, or coworkers can lead to unpleasant experiences and professional challenges for teachers (Marzano, 2003; Papatraianou et al., 2018). Challenging professional relationships may involve conflicts, lack of cooperation, or communication problems, which can increase stress and reduce teacher job satisfaction (Beltman et al., 2022; Mansfield et al., 2014). At the personal level, professional challenges include low self-efficacy (Kitching et al., 2009), poor health (Day & Gu, 2010), and negative emotions (Veronese et al., 2018). A disparity between professional expectations and actual practices (Flores & Day, 2006) or reluctance to seek help (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), as well as inadequate social and emotional

competencies, may also result in classroom relationship issues and, ultimately, professional challenges (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014).

1.2 Teacher well-being

Over the past 20 years, teacher well-being has risen to the top of scientific and political agendas due to teacher shortages, the high incidence of mental and physical health problems, and the significance of teacher well-being for student academic progress and school outcomes (Viac & Fraser, 2020). As shown by Hascher and Waber (2021), teacher well-being is used as an all-encompassing concept to describe a variety of dimensions, including different aspects of burnout, stress, emotions, motivation, and health factors, as well as their interactions. They identified five different research fields (a) psychology of well-being, (b) positive psychology, (c) psychology and work organisation, (d) teacher well-being, and (e) health science (p. 6). The specific definition of teacher well-being frequently relates to the disciplinary approach of the studies. In the present study, we define teacher well-being as a positive imbalance—that is, the prevalence of positive dimensions (e.g. enjoyment of teaching, self-efficacy beliefs) over the negative dimensions (e.g. worries, physical discomfort) (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2011; Hascher & Waber, 2021). The more pronounced the contrast between positive and negative qualities, the deeper the sense of well-being.

Recent research has identified numerous factors that contribute to teacher well-being (for an overview, see Hascher & Waber, 2021), and the quantity of research is increasing. However, except during the pandemic, few studies have aimed to elucidate the processes that lead to maintaining or restoring well-being when facing challenges. Primarily, cross-sectional studies have demonstrated the relationships between teacher well-being and age, gender, tenure, and concepts like self-efficacy or resilience (e.g. Jones et al., 2019). Studies have also confirmed the role of social support for teacher well-being (e.g. Viac & Fraser, 2020). Professional challenges, however, may be of specific importance for their impact on teacher well-being, because they urge teachers to engage actively and react to a situation.

The benefits of investigating teacher well-being have been demonstrated in prior research. For example, studies have pointed to the association of teacher well-being with more effective teaching (Duckworth et al., 2009) and improved student performance (Klusmann et al., 2016). Also, it has been confirmed that teacher well-being promotes students' well-being (Harding et al., 2019), which can, in turn, support their academic outcomes. Understanding the process that maintains well-being despite professional challenges thus seems critical.

1.3 Teacher resilience

As with teacher well-being, teacher resilience is a vital construct associated with teachers' commitment, engagement, and job satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2014). Resilience can be considered a dynamic process or an outcome that is the product of a person's engagement with his or her environment over time. It is demonstrated by how individuals respond to challenging events (Mansfield et al., 2012). Teacher resilience is characterised by various positive aspects such as job satisfaction, engagement, teaching effectiveness, well-being, and a sense of professional identity (e.g. Day & Gu, 2014). Mansfield et al. (2016) note that resilient teachers could draw on individual resources such as self-belief and optimism (e.g. Day & Gu, 2014) and contextual resources, such as support from colleagues (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019) while managing professional challenges. Recent research, however, has illuminated the complex and context-dependent nature of resilience and the crucial role of the school context in fostering or inhibiting it (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019).

Although teacher resilience has been considered from various perspectives and disciplines, a common understanding can be identified regarding the definition of resilient teachers. Ungar's (2012) social-ecological perspective has been used to understand teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016) and,

in particular, the interplay of both individual and multi-contextual resources in the resilience process while managing professional challenges. However, it is still necessary to comprehend how strategies are used for dealing with professional challenges and how this contributes to maintaining or restoring teacher well-being.

1.4 Teacher strategies

Research on teacher resilience has highlighted the significance of coping strategies when teachers encounter challenging situations (Parker & Martin, 2009). Coping strategies are "fundamental human adaptive processes" that assist teachers in managing stress and negative emotions (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016, p. 2). Typically, coping strategies focus on reducing extreme negative emotions or modifying the stressful situation that triggered them (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). Lazarus and Folkman (1991) identified two primary coping strategies for handling difficult situations—emotion-focused and problem-focused. Emotion-focused strategies are reactive and prove beneficial when control over the stressor is limited, while problem-focused strategies prove more successful in addressing the source of stress (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002). Prior research has indicated that problem-focused coping (e.g. planning or active coping) is positively connected with work engagement, self-efficacy for teaching, and job satisfaction (Parker et al., 2012; Parker & Martin, 2009). In a recent study, Beltman and Poulton (2019) explored the strategies identified by 73 teachers and classified them into *waiting* (e.g. taking a breath or waiting for the next day), *assessing* (e.g. viewing from a distance or referring to existing literature), *problem-solving* (e.g. talking with colleagues), and *being proactive* (e.g. deciding not to take work home or pursuing hobbies). Given the growing concerns regarding the challenges in the teacher profession, further research is needed to understand how teachers apply coping strategies when faced with challenging situations, as this might help to elucidate how strategies contribute to teacher well-being within a resilience process. The AWaRE model provides a comprehensive framework to further explore the relationship between teachers' professional challenges and their strategies.

1.5 Integrating teacher resilience and well-being: The AWaRE model

Although the terms well-being and resilience are often used in tandem and sometimes interchangeably, the conceptualisation of these constructs needs closer attention. One of the reasons is the dynamic, complex, and multidimensional nature of both constructs and a need for more explanation of how they are related to each other (Hascher et al., 2021, p. 417). The recently introduced AWaRE model outlines the resilience process, framed by challenges and resources at the contextual and individual levels (see Figure 1).

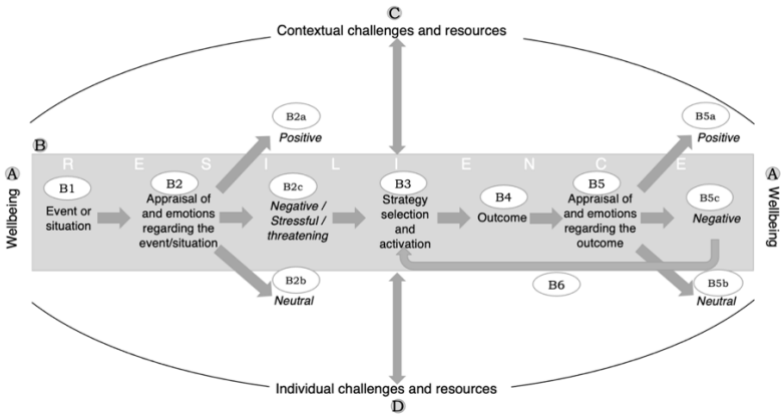


Figure 1. The AWaRE model, showing the relationship between resilience and well-being (Hascher et al., 2021, p. 422).

According to Hascher et al. (2021), the resilience process (B) is initiated by an event that may have a detrimental effect on teacher well-being (see B1 in Figure 1). In our paper, we refer to this event as a professional challenge. Regarding teachers' resilience process, both single and mild types of stressful or unpleasant experiences—as well as longer-term stressful events like burnout or leaving the field—are possible professional challenges. The model's next component, the appraisal process, refers to teachers' assessment of the event (see B2 in Figure 1). If individuals appraise a professional challenge as negative, stressful, or threatening, they believe that the harm of the event is likely to affect their well-being, which activates the resilience process (Hascher et al., 2021). In the resilience process, teachers employ various strategies to cope with this negative, stressful, or threatening professional challenge (see B3 in Figure 1).

The strategy selection and application lead to an outcome (see B4 in Figure 1) that reflects the strategy's effectiveness. This outcome is cognitively and emotionally evaluated a second time by reflecting on the negative/stressful/threatening professional challenge (see B5 in Figure 1) and, if the evaluation is neutral or positive, leads to the restoration of teacher well-being. If the evaluation is negative, the steps of selecting and applying strategies is repeated (see B6 in Figure 1). This evaluation process, which, according to the Lazarus model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), consists of a primary and secondary evaluation, is crucial for the individual's perception of his or her ability to overcome similar professional challenges using the same strategies (Hascher et al., 2021, pp. 426–427). While research has shown many challenges that teachers may face (e.g. Gu & Day, 2013), few studies have specifically addressed teachers' strategies in the face of individually relevant professional challenges.

1.6 The present study

In the AWaRE model, identifying professional challenges and strategies supporting teacher well-being are vital for understanding how the resilience process contributes to teacher well-being. It is assumed that the individual cognitive and affective interpretation of an event, here defined as a professional challenge, is relevant for the activation of the resilience process. Within this process, negative appraisals of, for example, student behaviour as disturbing, collegial exchange as less supportive, or school management as less effective, as well as negative emotions such as anger, frustration, discontentment, or anxiety are expected to activate the selection of strategies that help to overcome these challenges and to restore well-being. Thus, knowledge about this critical part of the resilience process—that is, the interplay of professional challenges and teachers' strategies—could advance the research field.

Previous research has shown that the teaching profession is under pressure due to the high responsibility for students, multiple demanding tasks that go beyond teaching, high workload and time pressure, and societal expectations such as inclusion or digital education (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; OECD, 2019). However, there is still a lack of knowledge *of how* teachers cope with these professional challenges (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020) and how they restore or maintain their well-being in the face of these challenges. While some quantitative research has successfully identified factors negatively or positively associated with teacher well-being (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), this qualitative study aims to illuminate the interrelatedness of individually relevant professional challenges and strategies within the resilience process.

By considering teachers' professional challenges and strategies, this study offers a subjective perspective on the situations of the teaching profession that affect teacher well-being and call for resilience. It helps to clarify how teachers cope with professional challenges in restoring their well-being. The insights into how teachers manage to function at work can inform schools on how to support teachers better and guide teacher education programmes in preparing future teachers. Moreover, knowledge about professional challenges and coping strategies contributes to translating the theoretical AWaRE model into empirical research and increases our understanding of the resilience process. Accordingly, our study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What professional challenges do teachers encounter?

RQ 2: What strategies do teachers employ to restore or improve their well-being in response to professional challenges?

Embedded into the AWaRE-Model (Hascher et al., 2021), we expect answers to these research questions to contribute to an understanding of the resilience process—which helps teachers to succeed and thrive in their profession—and, thus, add new knowledge to the theory of teacher well-being and resilience.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and procedure

Study participants were *N* = 29 Swiss teachers (28 females) of compulsory schooling (Grades 1–9) who were invited for an online interview (45 to 60 minutes) between April and May 2021. Participants were selected through snowball sampling. In a quantitative check, they proved to be high on the well-being scale except for one person. Throughout the survey, schools were open for the entire school year, in contrast to the prior year, when, in Switzerland, most schools were closed from March 16 to May 11, 2020. The study period was explicitly chosen as the pandemic was having less of an impact on schools. Recognising that the pandemic could be challenging, we did not want to limit responses to this specific challenge and asked about challenges and corresponding strategies in teachers' daily lives. This type of questioning may have resulted in some comments about the pandemic but should not limit the variety of responses. Nearly half (48%) of the sample were early career teachers (5 years of experience or less), 32% had 6–15 years of teaching, and 20% had more than 16 years of experience. More than half of teachers (56%) were under 30, 32% were aged 31–50, and 12 % were older than 51. The majority of participants (56%) worked full-time. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants consented to the audio recording. All personally identifiable information was anonymised.

2.2 Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) allowed us to delve deeply into the participants' perspectives and concerns during the resilience process (Creswell, 2002; Hascher et al., 2021). The interview questions explored teacher well-being, resilience, and coping strategies for professional challenges. The questionnaire guide encouraged the participants to respond to the questions in light of their everyday professional life. We investigated the strategies used to cope with a challenging event or situation, the impact of these strategies on teachers' well-being, and aligned teachers' reported experiences with the AWaRE model. The data used for this study were drawn from responses to the following questions.

(Professional) challenges

- What (professional) challenges have you experienced?
- In which phase of your professional life did this challenging event/situation happen?
- Please reflect on what you think the reasons for this event/situation were.
- How did you feel? What emotions/feelings did you experience?
- What role did students, colleagues, school administration, and parents play?

Strategies

- What did you do about the challenging event/situation you experienced?
- What personal resources and which of your character strengths helped you to deal with this event/situation?

- Which strategies helped you to cope with this event/situation?
- What other resources and supporting factors did you find helpful?

2.3 Data analysis

To explore the strategies used in challenging situations, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of the data in three phases. In the first phase, we transcribed the interviews and used Kuckartz's (2018) qualitative content analysis method to develop a coding scheme. This resulted in the isolation of 71 challenges and 143 strategies, which were analysed separately to gain an overall understanding of their prevalence. Codes emerged throughout the analysis to avoid predetermined frameworks (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). MAXQDA software facilitated the coding process, and a codebook with clear definitions and characteristics of the categories was created. Intercoder reliability assessment using Cohen's kappa was conducted, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. The analysis in this phase was inductive, leading to the identification of 9 first-order categories of professional challenges and 12 first-order categories of strategies (Oancea & Punch, 2014). In the second phase, we analysed the coded data to establish higher-order categories. Similar concepts were grouped together (using a coding unit from 30 to 60 words), and we referred to relevant literature, including the work of Beltman and Poulton (2019; Beltman et al., 2022), to identify these higher-order categories. Consequently, we identified three higher-order categories for challenges.

Table 1 illustrates the challenging events and situations teachers encountered. Further sub-coding was performed from the three main codes—organisational, relational, and personal—and are shown below with anchor examples. Participant identification is indicated in parentheses—that is, P11 indicates an exact quote from participant number 11.

Table 1

Professional Challenges: Main and Subcategories, Anchor Examples

Organisational professional challenges
School system critique
"(...) or children for whom you can't find a place, or you notice in the whole system that this child is simply not in good hands and (...) yes, what do you do then? And these are already such questions or moments of stress, which are close to me and bother me, which I also take home with me." [P10]
Class constellations
"And also with the individualisation, I think that's a good thing, but certain things are just somehow not possible, because you have so many students, because it's a wild to and fro, because it's difficult to always keep track of the learning level of each child. "[P22]
Reforms, new curriculum
"(...) the current development with the curriculum 21, where I am really partly overwhelmed (...) everything that would be required, where I get the impression that we can no longer manage that as a school." [P23]

Relational professional challenges
Concerns with colleagues
"I have had to listen to a lot of very terrible comments about myself, which have nothing to do with my everyday work. Badmouthing, blasphemies in a nasty way." [P12]
Concerns with students
"When a child refuses to do the tasks in class, that's difficult."[P26]
Concerns with parents
"In my second year of working I already knew that one parent was rather difficult and then I had the parent meeting, and it didn't go on that long, then this father was yelling at me. And I, as a young teacher, was there, and I didn't know how to react to it. "[P20]
Personal professional challenges
Physical
"I was very stressed because I knew 'I have to go to school and I have to do this and that and oh no, there are still seven students who don't have an apprenticeship' (...) and I realised I come home, and I can't sleep, or I can't sleep very well." [P06]
Workload
"All the corrections, tests, meetings and so on (...) I don't know where to start." [P05]
Emotional
"For me it is particularly stressful or particularly challenging when I notice that everything is slipping away from me, as if emotionally (...) when the daily routine with the children is simply too turbulent. When I don't really believe in myself." [P10]

In the next step, the reported coping strategies were categorised. We discovered emotional strategies as found by Beltman and Poulton (2019). We subsequently classified them into four overarching categories, namely *waiting*, *assessing*, *problem-solving*, and *being proactive.* As all of the examples in the category problem-solving were related to activating social resources, this category was named relational problem solving (Table 2). We then revisited the data to further differentiate categories related to interactional relationships at school and outside of school, as well as cooperative relationships at schools. Table 2 provides anchor examples of the differentiated subcategories. Throughout the analysis, an iterative process involving three researchers was employed to enhance reliability and credibility. Regular discussions among two independent coders ensured consistency and consensus. The findings of each phase of the analysis are presented in the following section.

Table 2

Strategies: Main and Subcategories, Anchor Examples

Waiting
Taking a deep breath
"Something can always happen (…) so you should just be open and take a breath, not panic right away." [P29]
Stepping away from the situation
"…And sleep on it once and (…) then look at it again the next day. Maybe then you look at it with a completely different view. [P19]
Assessing
Looking at the bigger picture
"Yes, I was glad to realise that the problem was not me, but this woman. The fact that she herself had problems—understanding that helped me. [P08]
Taking someone else's perspective
"Maybe I also have a bit of empathy and can respond empathetically to the parents. I think that then my goodwill towards the child also comes across." [P27]
Optimism
"(…) Looking back, it was very enriching for me. This overpromotion was a challenge that strengthened me. So just as the situation was negative, it was also positive afterwards." [P18]
Literature
"In a book (…) I read tips on how to deal with difficult situations." [P07]
Relational problem-solving
Instrumental social action
"There was a school counsellor; I called him and also explained the situation (…) he explained to me that this is quite normal (…) and then he dealt with the parents and told them clearly (…) then it never happened again." [P20]
Asking friends and family
"Yes, definitely the exchange with colleagues or family. They have a more neutral view of it because they are not in the middle of the situation. That's why they have a different

	perspective and can come up with different solutions. Yes, and so they can give you tips." [P03]
Collaboration	
	"I think that it makes a lot of difference that I am not alone in the classroom, because there is still the remedial teacher who sits down with me and says: what is our next step? [P07]
Being pro-active	
Downtime	
	"So, for me, it's very important that I separate school and home. I also have a school phone where parents can reach me and which I rarely take home…." [P27]
Good preparation	
	"If I know that I have parent–teacher meetings in two weeks, I prepare things for class in advance." [P11]
Reducing workload	
	"I have a correction station where the kids can correct themselves." [P07]

3. Results

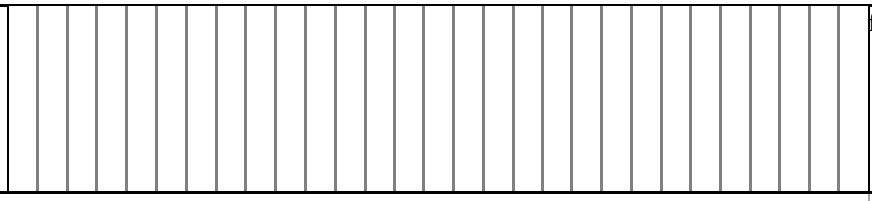
The following sections describe the essential findings and most significant aspects obtained from teachers' responses to the interview questions in three sections. The first section demonstrates the reported professional challenges. The second section describes the strategies applied afterwards to overcome the professional challenge. The third section takes a holistic view of the resilience process through two illustrative cases.

3.1 Reported professional challenges

Participants in this study faced various professional challenges regardless of how long they had been teachers. The professional challenges exhibited significant variation in duration and intensity, ranging from brief encounters to prolonged experiences lasting several months. Daily weaker professional challenges and highly stressful and emotionally taxing challenges were described. The three levels of challenges are illustrated in Table 3. The stated challenging situations or events were grouped into three primary levels—organisational (f=13), relational (f=43), and personal (f=15). Despite the variety of professional challenges, which highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the teaching profession, we found that the most common professional challenges were *relational* and equally distributed between concerns with parents, colleagues, and students. The challenges are outlined in order of frequency.

Table 3

Reported Professional Challenges

Participants (01–29)[1] **Challenges**		**f**
Relational		**42**
Concerns with parents		**15**
Concerns with students		**15**
Concerns with colleagues		**12**
Organisational		**13**
School system critique		**6**
Class composition		**5**
Reforms, new curriculum		**2**
Personal		**16**
Physical		**5**
Emotional		**5**
Workload		**6**

Note: (f) relates to the overall frequencies of mentions. The intensity of the shades represents the frequency of mentions per participant. [1]The columns correspond to the 29 participants.

Professional challenges at the *relational* level were reported most frequently. Responses were coded into subcategories based on the groups of interaction partners. Reported relational challenges included concerns with colleagues (f=12), with students (f=15), and with parents (f=15). Teachers agreed that relational situations had a profound impact on their daily professional lives. They noted unresolved conflicts and lack of support from colleagues. The reported professional challenges with students were related to managing diverse student needs and behaviours and difficulties in engaging students effectively. Teachers also expressed frustration with disruptive student behaviour and students' lack of motivation. Regarding professional challenges with parents, participants described feeling judged and scrutinised by parents. They expressed a need for better communication and partnership with parents to foster a supportive learning environment.

At the *personal* level, physical issues (f=5), increased workload (f=5), and emotional challenges (f=6), such as low self-efficacy, were reported as professional challenges. Teachers commented on the physical challenges by pointing out that they have insomnia and tinnitus and struggle with headaches

more often than average. They felt burdened with the many different tasks and with meeting the different requirements. They also worried about a subjective lack of self-efficacy regarding professional tasks such as digital literacy, heterogeneity or parent cooperation. Struggles with sleeping patterns, thought circles, and "not being able to let go" were factors reported on a personal level. Professional challenges revealed a sense of overwhelm and the need for additional support. A small group experienced difficulties in work–life balance.

Professional challenges at the *organisational* level were mentioned least often. Among the *organisational* challenges, critique of the existing school system (f=6), class composition (f=5), and issues with reforms and the new curriculum (f=2) were reported as challenging factors. The challenges related to reforms and the new curriculum highlighted the inherent difficulties in implementing changes within the educational system. Participants expressed a need for adequate training and professional development to navigate such changes successfully. Teachers seem concerned with the school system when children do not seem to "fit the existing system". The critique of the existing school system and concerns about class compositions indicated a desire for more inclusive and flexible approaches to education. Participants expressed a need for tailored support and resources to address the diverse needs of their students effectively. Critique of the system was closely linked to the reported professional challenges related to class composition that include student heterogeneity, social integration, and adaptive teaching.

3.2 Reported strategies

The strategies that teachers reported could be assigned to four categories (see Table 4)—waiting (f=9), assessing (f=24), problem-solving (f=88), and pro-active (f=19). Among the various coping strategies, problem-solving strategies capitalising on social support emerged as consistently employed by the majority of participants, hence the category name of "relational problem solving".

Table 4

Reported Coping Strategies

Participants (01–29)[1] **Strategies**																														**f**
Relational problem-solving																														**88**
Instrumental social action																														**45**
Asking friends and family																														**23**
Collaboration																														**20**
Assessing																														**24**
Looking at the bigger picture																														**6**
Taking someone else's perspective																														**8**
Optimism																														**5**
Literature, further reading																														**5**
Being proactive																														**22**
Downtime																														**12**
Good preparation																														**7**
Reducing workload																														**3**
Waiting																														**9**
Taking a deep breath																														**6**
Stepping away from the situation																														**3**

Note: (f) relates to the overall frequencies. The intensity of the shades represents the frequency of mentions per participant. [1]The columns correspond to the 29 participants.

The most prevalent strategy was relational problem-solving, which included three sub-categories: instrumental social action, asking friends and family, and cooperation. Instrumental social action (f=45) involved actively discussing professional challenges and seeking professional support. For example, the teachers' lounge was recognised as a supportive environment where teachers could share their problems and seek advice from colleagues (f=15). Teachers also shared their professional challenges more exclusively with a trusted colleague, followed by an in-depth discussion about potential solutions (f=14). Teachers also sought advice from mentors (f=8) and school social workers (f=8); these professionals provided strategic guidance that facilitated the planning of subsequent actions.

Beyond the school environment, teachers found support through friends and family (f=23). These out-of-school relationships provide a network that helps teachers reporting about professional

challenges in a non-professional context. In talking with friends and family, teachers primarily sought emotional support in dealing with professional challenges.

Collaboration included exchanging materials (f=5) and team teaching (f=5). The active cooperation of a second teacher implies sharing resources and responsibility for coping with professional challenges. Team activities such as co-planning (f=14) and initiating team meetings addressing prevalent professional challenges (f=6) were also mentioned.

A*ssessing* was the second most frequent coping strategy. The 24 reported situations of assessing were evenly distributed across four subcategories (see Table 4). Taking someone else's perspective emerged as a prominent aspect of assessing strategies, with an equal number of statements addressing the perspectives of students and parents. In the case of optimism, the strategy of *seeing the positive* in a situation was reported. Also, strategies of professional development such as further training (f=3) and consulting literature (f=2) were mentioned.

The proactive coping strategy was divided into three categories, with downtime (f=12) being the most mentioned strategy. Participants engaged in sports and allotted time dedicated to themselves. Good preparation (f=7) was mentioned as a crucial individual strategy in which teachers planned the lessons and their free time ahead. The explicit mention of reducing their workload (f=3) further demonstrated the teachers' proactive efforts to manage their responsibilities effectively.

The least often reported strategy was *waiting*. Despite the relatively low frequency of mentions, it is noteworthy that teachers reported remaining calm in a moment of heightened emotion as helpful, such as taking a deep breath (f=6) and stepping away from the situation (f=3).

3.3 Understanding the resilience process through two illustrative cases

Our data analysis so far has revealed that relational professional challenges and problem-solving were reported most frequently among the participants. In the following section, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of how relational challenges negatively affect teacher well-being and how relational coping strategies contribute to restoring teacher well-being. Two in-depth cases help to elucidate the resilience processes depicted in the AWaRE model (see Figure 1). Both cases centre on a negative appraisal of a professional challenge involving students. However, they differ regarding the coping strategies employed and the outcomes achieved. In the first case, the teacher proactively sought help from professionals within the school and engaged in open communication with parents, which ultimately resulted in restoring the teacher's well-being. In the second case, the initially applied strategies failed to restore the teacher's well-being. However, through reflection and adjustment (illustrated as a loop in the AWaRE model), the teacher identified a new strategy that ultimately led to an improvement in her condition, thus signifying an evolving journey wherein the resilience process remains incomplete.

3.3.1 A resilience process based on successful instrumental social action and collaboration

Participant 18 (pseudonym Laura) began working at her current school as a first- and second-grade teacher in 2015 after travelling and substituting. She was in her 8th year of teaching and taught students from Grades 1–6. Laura described having weeks where she felt "at ease" and how she loved the flexibility of being a teacher, as she was able to integrate hobbies into her daily activities whenever the weather was great. When a week was more challenging, she explained that she had to work "on weekends in cases of emergency". However, having a good work–life balance has always been important to her.

Laura encountered a challenging situation (B1) with two boys with "behavioural issues" who "made a pact." Laura noticed "how much power they can have together" and worried about their impact on the class. She realised she needed to break the negative spiral to avoid unforeseen consequences. She appraised the professional challenge (B2c) as "extremely demanding" and realised that it kept "occupying her thoughts". As a first strategy (B3), she talked to "school

administrators, school social workers, the parents of students and the curative teacher". She also assessed her part and reminded herself of tips she had learned from a former coach of autistic children in her class. She realised that her strategies had a positive outcome (B4) and that the children responded to the measures she had undertaken. Looking back on the situation, Laura described it as a highly enriching experience. She highlighted the effort between herself and the children as strengthening their relationship. Laura noted that the children became aware that submitting to the measures implemented resulted in more freedom and the opportunity to engage in particular activities. In her perception, the situation had both negative and positive aspects. In retrospect, she appraised the situation (B5) as follows:

> Looking back, it was very enriching for me. I was able to work with the children, strengthen the relationship, and (…) they became aware that it makes sense to submit to it because they have much more freedom or can also do special things. So, just as the situation was negative, it was also positive afterwards.

3.3.2 A resilience process with a loop based on unsuccessful instrumental social action but successfully asking friends and family

Participant 12 (pseudonym Lily) had been working for 5.5 years and had experience in the third and fourth grades, as well as the fifth and sixth grades. Her desired grade level would be fifth and sixth grade, but she took on a third-grade class in the summer. She had a workload of 30 lessons, up to 100%. Lily described her daily routine as teaching in the morning and the afternoon and going home between 18:30 and 19:00 each evening. If she could take a break, it never lasted longer than 3 minutes, which she described as "not so pleasant". For her, during teacher training, "a wonderful world (was) shown, which is not true and does not correspond to reality."

Lily would have liked to see "all the teachers pulling together" at her current school and not "just looking out for themselves." This became evident when she described it as "always the same people doing something" and "the same people doing nothing." She described the professional challenge (B1) when "children were left to run wild", and she was "not supported" in this challenging situation. The school administration "bullied" her and "picked on her personally and privately." She appraised the situation (B2) as "very difficult"; she "almost burnt out because of it". She then went on sick leave because she had "such severe cramps in all her muscles" and "could no longer switch off from her job". She had to put up with "terrible comments about her person" when she left. She had the impression (B2c) of being "held responsible" for the situation.

In this situation, Lily had "felt helpless." She described not knowing where to "get help." On advice, she went to an outside agency (B3). However, this could have been of "little help" to her. They told her that she had "no chance to take action against such a school management" and was advised to "leave the school" (B4). She had hoped for help to learn "how one can defend oneself against such a system" and was "disappointed" (B5). Afterwards, she did not know how to "get out of this situation" and felt that "nobody helped her" (B5c).

It was only when her partner also advised her several times to quit that she "decided to leave" (B3 loop) to "help herself that way." In reflecting on the professional challenges, Lily stated that she was happy to have gone through them because they taught her valuable lessons on maintaining her well-being. She expressed that leaving school was not a sign of giving up (B5a) but rather a way of protecting herself and caring for her well-being.

4. Discussion

Teacher well-being and resilience are topical in educational research, given the high demands placed on teachers and the teacher shortage. Empirical studies are needed to further our understanding of the relationship between teachers' resilience and well-being. This study investigated teachers' professional challenges (RQ1) and analyse which coping strategies teachers use to maintain or restore

their well-being (RQ2). In doing so, it aimed to advance our theoretical understanding of the resilience process within the newly introduced AWaRE model (Hascher et al., 2021).

Teachers in this study faced a variety of professional challenges at the organisational (e.g. school system, class composition) and personal levels (e.g. low self-efficacy, physical issues), with *relational* challenges being the most prevalent (RQ1). This aligns with current research, as social challenges such as lack of recognition or support of principals, parent complaints, and challenging behaviour among students have repeatedly been described in the educational literature (Castro et al., 2010; Gu & Day, 2013). Challenging relationships with parents, students, and fellow teachers may cause negative experiences for teachers (Beltman et al., 2019) and impede well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Professional challenges may be isolated and highly intense, such as an argument with a colleague or a parent, or less intense and sustained over time, such as the continuous disruptive behaviour of a student (Gu, 2014). The variety and complexity of the case studies also illustrate the role of subjective interpretation of the interplay of individual competencies and work conditions, which leads to the appraisal of a professional challenge as positive, neutral, or negative. These appraisals broaden our understanding of the beginning of the resilience process as described in the AWaRE model (Hascher et al., 2021).

Regarding strategies to sustain well-being (RQ2), teachers reported that *relational problem-solving* was the most frequent coping strategy, which indicates that relationships are perceived as both constraining and enabling (Papatraianou et al., 2018). Teachers reported using supportive interactional relationships in the school context with colleagues or school principals (Honingh & Hooge, 2014) administration and relationships outside of school (e.g. with family or friends) to seek advice or take action with their help to deal with professional challenges. This aligns with prior research showing that positive relationships with students, colleagues, and other school community members play a crucial role in boosting teacher work satisfaction and well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Rueger et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Positive interactions with students and colleagues can also be viewed as job resources in the job demands resources (JD-R) model, the "good things" at work that have inherent motivational quality and induce positive energy at work, leading to better outcomes (Schaufeli, 2017, p. 121).

More importantly, our results helped to identify an additional form of relational problem-solving that we describe as *collaboration.* Collaboration related to a professional challenge can be seen as a more advanced form of a coping strategy that goes beyond seeking advice or sharing one's feelings with others and is beneficial in managing stress and promoting well-being (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2017; Kar et al., 2021). Instead, collaboration as a coping strategy enrols others into problem-solving. When teachers initiate collaboration in solving professional challenges, they recognise the systemic character of their challenges and aim to share their resilience process, as shown in the AWaRE model. This mode of collaboration appears to be unique compared to established or regular collaboration (e.g. de Jong et al., 2019; Little, 1990; Vangrieken et al., 2015), as it can be interpreted as a collective reaction to an individually perceived professional challenge. This likely reflects a teacher's belief that education in school calls for sharing and collaboration instead of singular action (Liu & Benoliel, 2022). In line with Ungar (2012), we advocate recognising the role of contextual and social environment. Within the resilience literature, "flocking" is presented as a coping mechanism similar to collaboration (Ebersöhn, 2012, p. 30). It underscores the group's joint response when confronted with professional challenges by sharing their resources and support networks. Like collaboration, which centres on working jointly to reach a mutual goal, flocking involves individuals uniting to surmount obstacles. It accentuates the strength of unity and collective action, thus demonstrating that when individuals band together, they can successfully navigate professional challenges to maintain well-being. In an educational institution, fostering a flocking culture would encourage educators to depend on each other, share resources, and collaboratively address professional challenges.

Along with *relational problem solving*, teachers reported employing *assessing* (e.g. finding the positive in a situation), *being proactive* (e.g. using downtime), and *waiting* (e.g. staying calm) as strategies. *Assessing* involves strategies that allow individuals to evaluate the situation thoroughly,

including reappraising the situation from different perspectives (Beltman & Poulton, 2019). Maintaining a sense of purpose and self-efficacy while taking momentary breaks to reassess professional challenges also supports the resilience process illustrated in the AWaRE model, as it changes the view of how a challenge is perceived. The *proactive* strategy aligns with the concept of self-care as an essential response among teachers (Schussler et al., 2018). As Beltman and Poulton (2019) showed, teachers actively implemented strategies to manage future instances of heightened emotions effectively, including engaging in hobbies or physical exercise. Accordingly, teachers aim to enhance their capacity to handle professional challenges that promote the resilience process in the AWaRE model. Consistent with Sutton's (2004) observation that well-prepared teachers experience fewer issues during lessons, participants in our study emphasised the significance of high-quality lesson preparation in preventing or mitigating professional challenges. Although rarely mentioned, *waiting* as a strategy supports the idea that a resilience process needs emotional regulation. Engaging in deep breathing and creating space for oneself can activate the sympathetic nervous system and facilitate recognising and labelling emotions, which enables teachers to respond appropriately to professional challenges (Sharp & Jennings, 2016). Accordingly, mindfulness training might be helpful to enrich teachers' strategies in reducing stress and improving well-being (Beshai et al., 2016; Sheppes et al., 2011)

Drawing a connection between professional challenges (RQ1) and strategies (RQ2), it becomes evident that social interactions serve a dual purpose. Social interactions are frequently cited as the primary professional challenge, yet simultaneously, they offer a valuable resource for coping strategies. Our research highlights that these social elements form a strategy for managing professional challenges. Given that teaching is inherently a social profession and given, too, the crucial role of social belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000), our findings underscore the importance of social competencies for thriving in this field. The two illustrative cases selected elucidate the relationship between professional challenges and strategies and a better understanding of the resilience process, as shown in the AWaRE model. Both cases are strongly related to the double role of social relatedness—that is, social interactions as professional challenges and for social support as a coping strategy—in restoring teacher well-being (e.g. Aelterman et al., 2007). Although the two cases differ regarding the resilience process and its outcomes, they are both represented in the AWaRE model. In both cases, the teacher's negative appraisal of a challenging situation with students sets the stage for the subsequent events (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Both cases illustrate how a resilience process may be initiated through issues with students and how teachers apply instrumental social action as a coping strategy. In both cases, the retrospective appraisal of the situation as enriching suggests personal growth, which indicates the potential for challenging situations to foster professional development (Mansfield et al., 2012).

The two cases also demonstrate the variability of the resilience process within the AWaRE model. In the first case, Laura's instrumental social action to seek help from various professionals and engage with parents demonstrates the role of relational strategies within the resilience process. She invited school team members and parents to discuss the challenging student behaviour and to search for a shared solution. This enabled collaboration in managing the professional challenges and expanded the perception of the issue as an individual professional challenge that needs collaboration inside and outside school. Her commitment to maintaining work–life balance may further support her well-being. Laura's case also shows how the school context contributes to a successful resilience process (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019), as school members and parents were willing to share the responsibility for Laura's professional challenge.

The second case demonstrates the negative consequences of lacking support and guidance from colleagues and school administration; it highlights how an unsupportive environment can hamper the resilience process and worsen the impact of professional challenges on teacher well-being (Mansfield, 2021). The process leading to leaving school can be understood through Lily's experience and the theoretical framework of stress and coping. Despite employing relational problem-solving strategies such as seeking support from school administration, colleagues, and the student's parents, her well-being was not restored. This lack of support potentially frustrated her need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2001), which led her to take leave and seek external advice, both of which were unsuccessful. As a final

strategy, she left the profession to protect herself and regain her well-being (Mansfield, 2021). Lily's perception of the challenge and her evaluation of her competence (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020) led to stress and dissatisfaction. As McClelland (1998) suggests, a sense of competence helps form a self-image capable of meeting requirements. When this self-image and perceived competence are undermined, it can lead to stress and, if unaddressed, could result in leaving the profession. Providing adequate professional support and addressing these factors can thus potentially prevent or delay the point of leaving school.

4.1 Limitations and strength of this study

The present study has several limitations that lead to suggested avenues for future research. First, the findings of our study refer to a particular cultural group, Swiss teachers. Future research could profit from findings on maintaining well-being within the resilience process among teachers in other cultural groups. Furthermore, future studies could control for teacher characteristics that may affect the relationship between well-being and resilience, such as teacher gender, migration background, professional years, or school stage (primary vs secondary education). In our study, almost half of the participants were early career teachers. While it is possible to track the resilience process, it does not necessarily mean that well-being is synonymous with staying in the profession.

Regarding the AWaRE model, it would be expedient to investigate the underlying mechanisms in appraising the effectiveness of the chosen coping strategy. It would also be beneficial to investigate teachers' strategies for coping with challenging situations in depth. We did not investigate professional challenges and strategies during the resilience process, as our analysis was conducted retrospectively. However, examining their implications within the context of the resilience process would be an intriguing aspect to explore in future studies. More detailed elaboration of the literature on teacher strategies could contribute to understanding the resilience process. Furthermore, longitudinal research on strategies could contribute to the understanding of possible patterns of associations between challenges and strategies.

Our research has several strengths. First, the present study is one of the first to analyse the well-being and resilience processes in alliance. We investigated how teachers manage professional challenges and which challenges they face. We also summarised teachers' strategies for challenging situations or events. Moreover, we applied a qualitative approach using interviews to allow teachers to express themselves and reflect upon their reported past experiences. Second, implementing the AWaRE model may have led to a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between well-being and resilience processes. In line with prior studies (e.g. Johnson & Down, 2013), the findings in our study have confirmed that teacher resilience plays a vital role in developing or restoring teacher well-being.

A unique insight from our study reveals the intricate interplay of these social challenges and strategies in the day-to-day interactions of teachers with students, parents, and colleagues within the resilience process. By delving into the challenges faced by teachers, our research not only enriches our understanding but also offers practical implications for teacher education programmes and ongoing training initiatives. Empowering both students and teachers with evidence-based strategies can be instrumental in navigating these challenges effectively. Furthermore, fostering a collaborative environment within teacher education and training programmes can instil a sense of belief and camaraderie among teachers, potentially cultivating protective strategies early in their careers.

Keypoints

- Teachers face a variety of professional challenges
- Relational challenges were the most common reported challenges among teachers
- Relational Problem-solving was the most frequently reported strategy
- Social relationships serve both as professional challenges as well as strategies
- Teachers aim at actively maintaining their well-being in the face of challenges as illustrated in the AWaRE model

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Appendix A
A semi-structured interview protocol

Warm-up (introductory questions, small talk)

Block: Warm-up	I would like to get to know your daily work routine a little better. Please tell me what a typical working day looks like for you. From morning to evening. What do you do during the day? Please refer to the time before the Corona pandemic.	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Level (preschool, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, timeout class)	• What grades do you teach? • How long have you been teaching at this level?	• Can you tell me any other things? • Is there anything else? • Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?
Typical workday	• What does the morning and afternoon work look like? • How many teaching hours do you normally have per day/week? • When do you prepare for class? • How many breaks do you have and how long do they take?	

Main part (topics to answer the research questions)

Theme 1: Teacher career

Block: Reflection on teaching career	Let's now look back at your teaching career. What were the most important stages in your development as a teacher? Please briefly describe the most important stages.	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Education/teaching experience	• Where did you complete your training? • Where did you gain your first teaching experience? • What further training have you done?	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?
Professional passion	• If you had the chance to start over again, would you still choose a career in teaching? • (If no) What profession would you like to choose and why?	

Theme 2: Teacher well-being

Block 1: School level (positive and negative aspects)	Now we will talk about the school where you teach. Could you please tell me: What makes your school stand out? What are the strengths that make your school stand out? What need for improvement do you see?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Positive and negative aspects of the context (challenging events/situations)	• How would you describe your school? • What is the reputation of your school, in your opinion? • What professional development opportunities/educational resources do you have? • How is your relationship with your colleagues? Do the teachers in your school support each other? Do you have enough collegial support? • How is the school climate? How is the school culture? • What would you like to see differently?	• Can you tell me any other things? • Is there anything else? • Do you have an example of this so I can imagine it more concretely? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

Block 2: Class level (lessons, students)		
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Contextual factors/class level	**Teaching** • How do you feel about teaching? How much do you like teaching? • Are there differences in terms of classes or subjects? • What is your teaching philosophy? • What is most important to you while teaching? • How would you rate the classroom climate? • What facilitates teaching in the class(es)? • What makes teaching in this class/these classes challenging? • What would you like to see differently? **Students**	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

	• Could you describe your class to me a little bit? What is the class climate like? • How do you get along with your students? • How is the interaction with students in the class? How is the relationship with the students? • What can be said about the class composition? • What are the relationships with parents like? • What would you like to see differently?	

Block 3: Individual level (teachers)	Could you please explain: What personal characteristics are most important to your work as a teacher? What strengths characterize you as a teacher? In which areas do you see a need for development?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Personal factors/ individual level (level of the teacher)	• As a teacher, what do you enjoy most of all? Which aspects of your work make you happy? • (If positive aspects(s) were mentioned) You said yes, that (answer: an aspect that makes you happy) makes you happy. What helps you maintain this? • Are there personal aspects that make your teaching career difficult? • What role does your school play in this? • What would you have liked to have done differently? • We all know that the teaching profession can be stressful, and rest is essential. How do you organize your rest?	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

Theme 3: Resilience

Block 1: Challenging/negative event/situation and coping strategies	Working as teachers is often associated with challenges. Please now select a particularly challenging situation or event. Describe this situation/event.	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Challenging event/situation	• What challenging event or situation did you experience? • At what stage of your professional life did this happen? • Thinking back, what do you think were the reasons for this situation/event? • How complex was the challenge/event?	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

	• How stressful was the challenge/event? • What was particularly difficult for you? • How did you feel? What emotions/feelings did you experience? • What role did students, colleagues, school administration, and parents play in this?	
Coping strategies	• What did you do about it? • How helpful was what you did? Why? • What personal resources, which of your character strengths helped you deal with this situation? • Where did you experience difficulties? What didn't work out so well? Why? • What would have been other options/strategies? Why did you not choose them? • What other resources, and supporting factors did you find useful?	

Theme 4: Prevention & Intervention

Block 1: Prevention	What should be paid attention to in teacher education so that young teachers can successfully enter the profession? What should be paid attention to in teacher education so young teachers feel comfortable in the profession?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Prevention (promoting well-being and resilience in teacher education)	• What should change in teacher education so that teachers feel ready to teach and begin a teaching career? • What can help teachers do well in their work lives? • What can contribute to teachers' well-being? • What could/should schools contribute?	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

Block 2: Intervention	What do you think would help make teachers happy to go to work?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
Intervention (measures; promoting teachers' well-being and resilience)	• What does a school need to consider to make teachers feel good? • What could a school change to help teachers cope better with challenges? • What structures need to be adapted? • What could improve job satisfaction?	• Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

Conclusion

Block: Conclusion	In conclusion to your reflections: What would you advise a teacher to do if she finds herself in a difficult situation and does not know what to do?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
	What is your conclusion? • Which strategies are helpful currently? Whom can you trust? • How should you behave to bring about an actual change? • What can you do yourself to change the situation?	• Can you tell me any other things? • Do you have an example so I can picture it clearer? • Can you describe it in more detail? • What do you mean by that?

Block: Completeness	Is there anything else you would like to mention that is important to you but has not come up here in the interview?	
Content aspects:	**Specific questions:**	**Follow-up questions:**
	Is there anything else you would like to elaborate on?	• Can you tell me any other things? • Is there anything else? • What else?