

School climate as the determinant of the relationship between the level of students' resilience and school satisfaction

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Abstract: Resilience is an individual's capacity to recover, adapt, and keep mental balance and normal functioning when exposed to significant adversity. This competence plays an important role in one's life because it increases the probability of achieving success in various spheres of life. Schools can foster students' resilience by providing a positive school environment and a sufficient number of protective factors, but it is the subjective interpretation of conditions and experiences rather than the exposure to them that is significant. The main objective of this research was to study to what extent school satisfaction, i.e. subjective interpretation of the school climate, influenced the level of students' resilience. Not all our findings are compatible with the results of other studies. Despite the limits of our research, its results can serve as a basis for further work as not much has been done in the field of resilience research in Slovakia.

Key words: school climate, resilience, coping, risk factors, protective factors.

Introduction

During their lives, people must deal with more or less serious problems, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts, stressful situations, and other adverse circumstances that can negatively influence one's healthy development. They are called risk factors and they increase the probability of negative developmental outcomes and problem behaviors of students. Under their influence one's reactions are often unusual, not relevant to the given situation.

There is a large scale of internal and external factors that can help a person to adjust to changing conditions and to deal with adversity. The present risk factors are in interaction with protective factors that can serve as a buffer to risk factors, to interrupt

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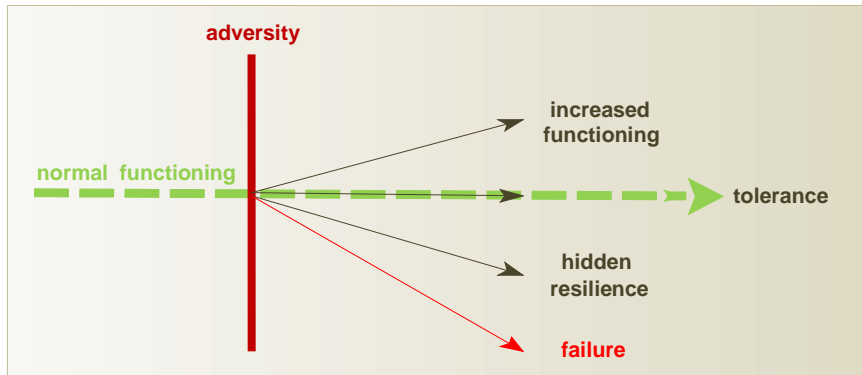
cumulative effects of risk, and may intervene to prevent a risk factor from having an effect (Barter, In Ungar, 2005, p. 348). The protective factors often create chains, complement one another, and have effect only in combination with the risk factors. The more stressors are present, the more protective factors are needed to counterbalance the negative effects of the environment. When confronted with new but manageable stressful life events, individuals widen their repertoire of coping strategies and later they are able to master the pressure they encounter when exposed to adversities. In this way they become less vulnerable, i.e. resilient.

Resilience is a special type of competence that can be fostered by every environment in which a person is situated. It is an individual's capacity to recover, adapt, and keep mental balance and normal functioning despite the exposure to various challenges: some are acute, occurring once, others are chronic and part of one's daily life (Ungar, 2006, p. 3). Resilience can be observed only when there is a significant threat to the individual, typically indexed by high-risk status or exposure to severe adversity or trauma (Masten – Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206).

It is now generally accepted that the capacity to overcome adversity varies from individual to individual. In this context we recognize four basic types of reactions to significant adversities:

- a) tolerance – individuals maintain functioning despite stressors;
- b) increased functioning – individuals can do even better than normally despite harsh; circumstances, exposure to adversity has a “steeling” effect on them;
- c) hidden resilience (Ungar, 2006, p. 82) – there is an actual decline in functioning but the individual “survives”; hidden resilience is often associated with antisocial behaviors which are used as a coping strategy;
- d) a failure.

Figure 1 *Levels of functioning* (Barnová, 2010, p. 49)



Physical and social ecologies in which people are situated have a great influence on their members and function as a potential source of both protective and risk factors. Everyday situations are never all bad or all good; they are a mixture of both favorable and unfavorable conditions. What makes experiences positive or negative is the individual's subjective interpretation of events, rather than the exposure to them. Situation appraisal is influenced by one's personal history and the actual context.

Due to their lack of experience, children and adolescents are vulnerable and are often among the most severely affected by adverse circumstances, therefore, adults are in charge of structuring such various social environments that support them in the process of acquiring knowledge, skills and experience necessary for successful participation in social life, and effective problem solving. Schools can promote students' resilience by offering a whole scale of protective factors in their environments and by maximum possible stress reduction. These are among the features of a positive school climate that is characterized by loyalty, trust, support, dynamics, expectations, and communication (Fisher, 2004), as opposed to school environments with a lot of fear, insecurity, and unreasonable conflicts. Examples of unsafe, unsecure school environments are schools, where bullying is tolerated (Tamášová, 2008, p. 39). From the school climate point of view, it is the quality of relationships inside the school that plays a significant role.

School satisfaction is a consequence of students' expectations and experiences; therefore there is a close relationship between school satisfaction and school climate. Every student spends several hours a day at school and for his/her development the fact whether he/she perceives this time as pleasant and meaningful or a waste of time is crucial. Positive school climate is one of the most important protective factors that a school can offer. S. Hlásna (2007, p. 253) characterizes the quality of students' life in a class as the subjective interpretation of objective circumstances of the quality of school

life and the quality of life in the class. It is mostly influenced by the positive impact of the school, positive relationships with teachers, quality of education, importance of school in students' lives, social factors, and students' self-esteem.

We can say that resilience is one of key competences as it is not only crucial when solving actual problems but its development increases the individual's capacity to perform well when adversity occurs in future and brings heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments. Though a lot of resilience research has been done abroad, unfortunately, not much attention has been paid to it in Slovakia. That is the reason why we decided to study the extent to which school satisfaction, i.e. subjective interpretation of school climate, influences the level of students' resilience.

2 Research objectives

The objective of our research was to study the levels of student resilience, their school satisfaction, and the extent to which school satisfaction, i.e. subjective interpretation of school climate, influences the level of students' resilience.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research tools

For the purpose of our research we decided to use the following tools: Gail M. Wagnild and Heather M. Young's THE RESILIENCE SCALE™ and a questionnaire. The Resilience Scale™ is an instrument to measure resilience as an important psychological factor. It is a tool based upon scientific research which was translated from the English original and the Slovak version was adapted to Slovak cultural settings by the Institute of Humanities in the Faculty of Education of Comenius University in Bratislava. It is a 25-item scale that measures resilience as a positive personality characteristic enhancing individual adaptation, i.e. the ability to cope with change or misfortune successfully. All items are worded positively and reflect accurately the statements made by participants in the initial study on resilience conducted by Wagnild and Young.

To measure students' subjective interpretation of school climate we created our own questionnaire because none of the available tools were suitable for our research. It consists of ordinal scales. The first version of the questionnaire was sent to three experts for evaluation two of whom made a range of comments. After the modification, the questionnaire was pilot-tested. The questionnaire consists of 50 closed questions

divided into 7 smaller questionnaires: “Relationships”, “In this school there is at least one teacher who ...”, “Our teachers ...”, “School”, “My class”, “I have at least one schoolmate who ...”, and “My friends at school”. In the first four parts we studied the conditions created by schools and teachers, i.e. things that cannot be much influenced by students if they do not have a chance to take part in decision making. In the last three parts we focused on student relationships. The collected data were sorted in MS Excel and we used PASW Statistics (formerly SPSS) for the statistical analysis.

3.2 Research sample

The research was conducted in three secondary grammar schools: a private school in Bratislava, a religious school in Ilava District, and a public school in Pezinok District. We used convenience sampling as it was very difficult to find schools willing to take part in the research. All three schools are recognized by public as offering high standard education and achieving good results. Our objective was to find a secondary grammar school in the capital and two schools in two different regions of Slovakia because of the differences in lifestyle in various parts of Slovakia and the number of risk factors to which students are exposed. Another criterion was that we were looking for a public, a private, and a religious school. The reason for choosing secondary grammar schools was that all of them offer more or less similar educational programs and their students must pass entrance examinations. These facts made the sample more consistent. There were 320 respondents; all of them were 10th and 11th grade students.

4 Results

Respondents who did not fill in the identification data in the research tools were excluded from the research. The same was applied to students who did not indicate their answers for all the items in The Resilience Scale™.

School	10th grade	11th grade	Together
<i>Public school in Ilava District</i>	56	80	136
<i>Religious school in Pezinok District</i>	44	55	99
<i>Private school in Bratislava</i>	32	25	57
Together	132	160	292

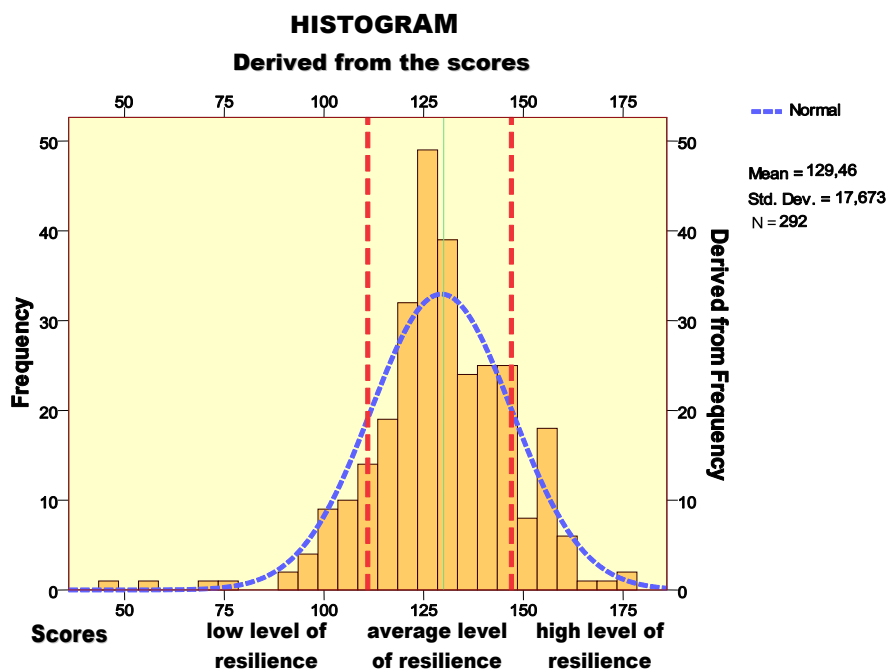
Table 1 *The final sample*

4.1 The Resilience Scale™

In the next step we started coding the collected data. Answers to all items in The Resilience Scale™ are scored from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Scores range from 25 – 175. The higher the final score is, the more resilient the student is. Based on their scores from The Resilience Scale™, we divided the respondents into three groups the following way:

1. we found the mean (= 129) and the standard deviation (= 18)
2. we found the intervals for different levels of resilience ($\mu - \sigma$)
 - low level of resilience – score range 25-110
 - average level of resilience – score range 111-147
 - high level of resilience – score range 148-175

Figure 2 *Levels of resilience*



Further on, we worked with two groups of students: students with low level of resilience and the group of students with average and high levels of resilience. We presumed that both students with average and high levels of resilience had the capacity to cope with adversity and could easily adjust to changing conditions. The only difference could be that highly resilient students could do so even more easily than students with average level of resilience.

4.2 Questionnaire

Each part of the questionnaire was evaluated separately. We used the following method of coding:

Answer	Code	
	positive statement	negative statement
<i>no</i>	-2	2
<i>probably no</i>	-1	1
<i>I don't know</i> or no answer	0	0
<i>probably yes</i>	1	-1
<i>yes</i>	2	-2

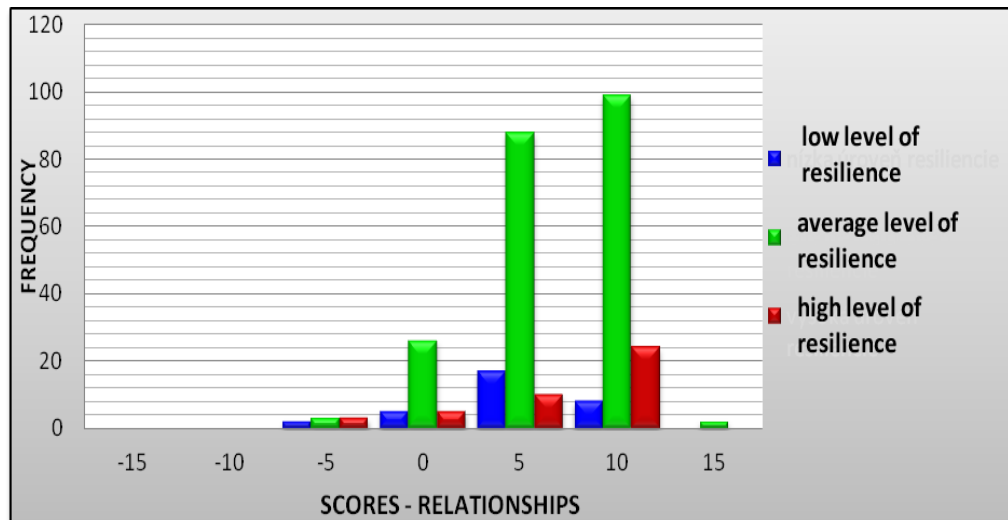
Table 2 *Coding*

We decided to apply this system of coding because the scores of every part of the questionnaire, as well as it is in the case of the questionnaire as a whole, show whether the given respondent perceives the examined characteristic of the school climate as positive or negative. There are 8 items with negative formulation in the questionnaire. We grouped the data according to students' resilience levels (see Section 4.1) and for every group found the mean, variance, constructed frequency tables, charts and we started statistical data analysis. We used the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test for independent groups and the Mann-Whitney test for independent groups (both tests at significance level $\alpha = 0.05$).

In the first part of the questionnaire we studied students' perception of relationships inside their schools, we were interested in the fact, whether their schools offer students positive and safe environment or not. Only 11.64% of all students achieved a negative score. Our findings show that students with low level of resilience perceived school relationships less positively (median score = 3) than their schoolmates with average or high levels of resilience (median score = 5). Based on these findings, we assume that the subjective interpretation of the quality of relationships in school, acceptance by

other members of the community, student satisfaction, and safe school environment are among the determinants that are closely connected with the level of resilience of the students.

Figure 3 *Questionnaire Part 1 – Relationships*

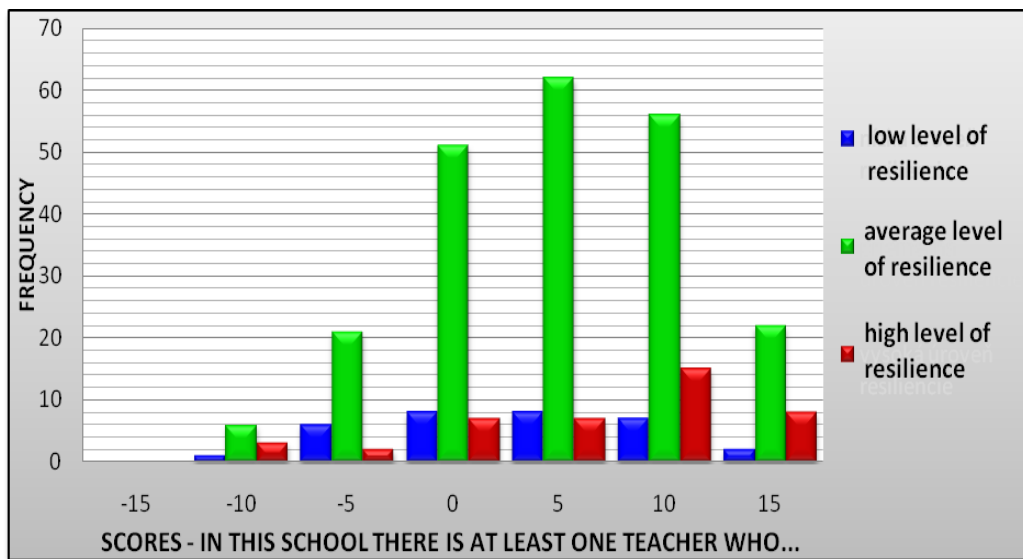


More positive perception of the school climate by the students with average and high levels of resilience in comparison to students with low level of resilience can be explained by the fact that they are able to adapt to new environments more easily. Therefore they could have perceived the new school conditions that they found unpleasant when entering the school as an inevitable part of school life and a challenge that they had to deal with. Resilient students gradually enlarge the scale of their coping strategies. We assume that this ability is the major contribution to a more positive perception of their school environment. What is more, resilient students are able and willing to take part in decision making, i.e. they actively participate in the process of creation of their school environment, and thus the conditions suit their needs.

Not every student is able to cope with adversity without an adult's assistance and it does not matter, how serious their problems are. Unfortunately, it is not unexceptional that there is no one who students can ask for help outside the school; there is no one who they can talk with. In the second part of the questionnaire we asked students if they have a supportive teacher at school who encourages them and who they can go to when they are in a difficult life situation. We did not find any significant differences between students with low level of resilience (median score = 2.5) and the group of

students with average and high levels of resilience (median score = 3). The results show that the presence or absence of at least one stable and supportive teacher at school does not influence students' resilience. That means that a relationship based on mutual trust for which a teacher's interest in the student and his/her problems, willingness to listen to him/her, belief that every student is able to achieve success, and appreciation of positive outcomes do not play a significant role. We must be very careful about such an assumption because the schools participating in the research were chosen conveniently. All three schools achieved good results so with a high probability these teachers applied an individual approach to every student. Another factor to be taken into consideration is that all schools had good prevention programs characterized by a close contact between students and teachers, though not every student felt it this way.

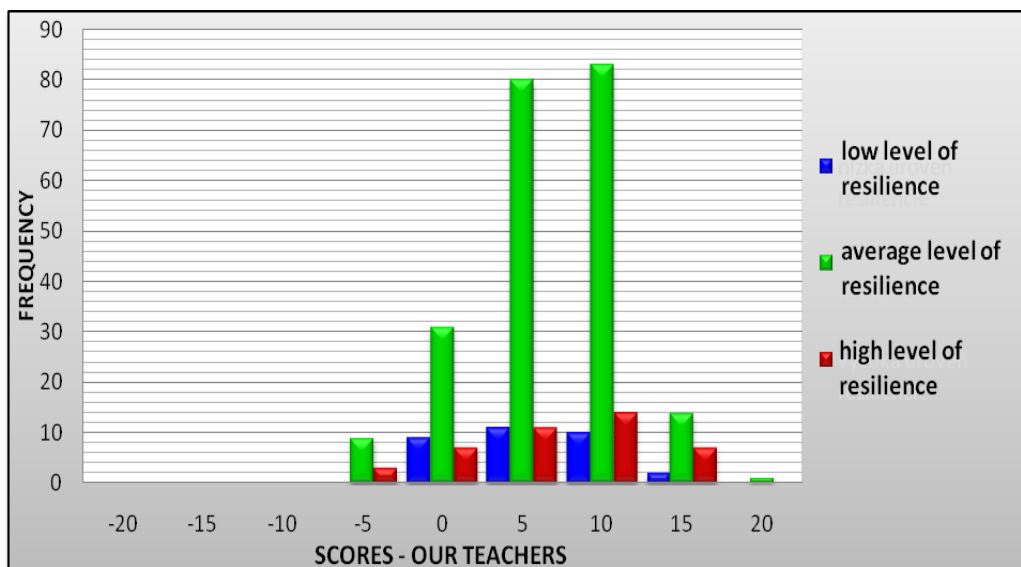
Figure 4 *Questionnaire Part 2 – In this school there is at least one teacher who...*



As we can read from Figure 4, a relatively high percentage of students (31.85%) achieved a negative score in the second part of the questionnaire, including students with high level of resilience. The answers of these students show that they did not trust any of their teachers but it is possible that they discuss their problems with the school counselor or they had a close adult outside the school, e.g. their coach, the priest, etc. It would mean that a close relationship with a teacher could be replaced by a relationship with a supportive member of the community where students live and therefore students did not feel the need to contact their teachers. The next possible explanation is that

students had some negative experience with teachers from the past or refused any kind of positive relationship because of the negative attitude of their peers or parents towards teachers in general. There are also students who can cope with challenging situations by themselves and they do not need their teachers' assistance. The third part of the questionnaire was focused on students' perception of their teachers' approach and their expectations. We asked them whether their teachers showed an effort to build equal relationships with them, if they were fair and able to confess their mistakes, and if they kept their word. These characteristics in combination with high expectations are considered to be among the important protective factors.

Figure 5 *Questionnaire Part 3 – Our teachers*

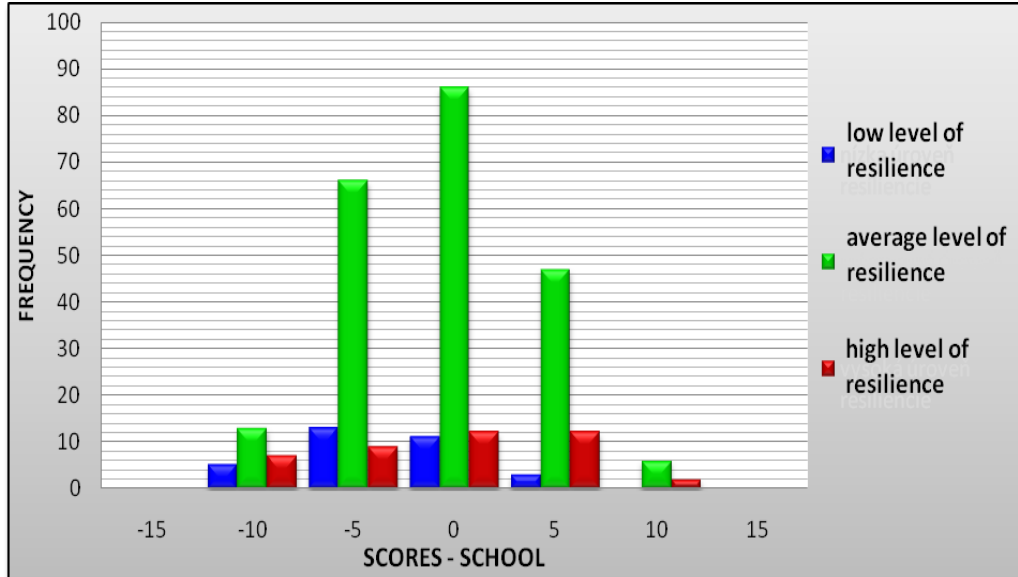


Our presumption that the more resilient the students are the more positive experiences with teachers they have was wrong. We did not find any significant differences between students with low level of resilience (median score = 3) and the group of students with average and high levels of resilience (median score = 3). Our findings are the proof of high standard of teachers' work at the schools because only a very small part of respondents (15.41%) evaluated their teachers negatively. Such a positive perception of teachers by students with low level of resilience, as can be seen in Figure 5, was a surprise to us, though the students of all three schools indicated good interpersonal relationships in other parts of the questionnaire, and thus such answers were natural. It is possible that students who were not satisfied with their teachers'

work were not objective because of an aversion towards teachers or were influenced by their parents' opinions.

The attractiveness and meaningfulness of school activities and the opportunities to participate in decision making at school level were studied by the fourth part of the questionnaire. We got less positive answers from students with low level of resilience (median score = -5) than from the group with average or high levels of resilience (median score = -3) what is in agreement with the results of several published studies. Surprisingly, as many as 69.52% of all students achieved a negative score in this part of the questionnaire, though for students it is very important to do activities they find attractive and meaningful. They want to have fun at school but at the same time they seek for knowledge and skills they can use outside the school. Teachers' creativity, application of unusual, interesting activities, new forms and methods of teaching can increase school satisfaction. Another important determinant of school satisfaction is the provision of opportunities to express opinions and to participate in decision making. The more opportunities students get, the more responsibility for their outcomes lies with them.

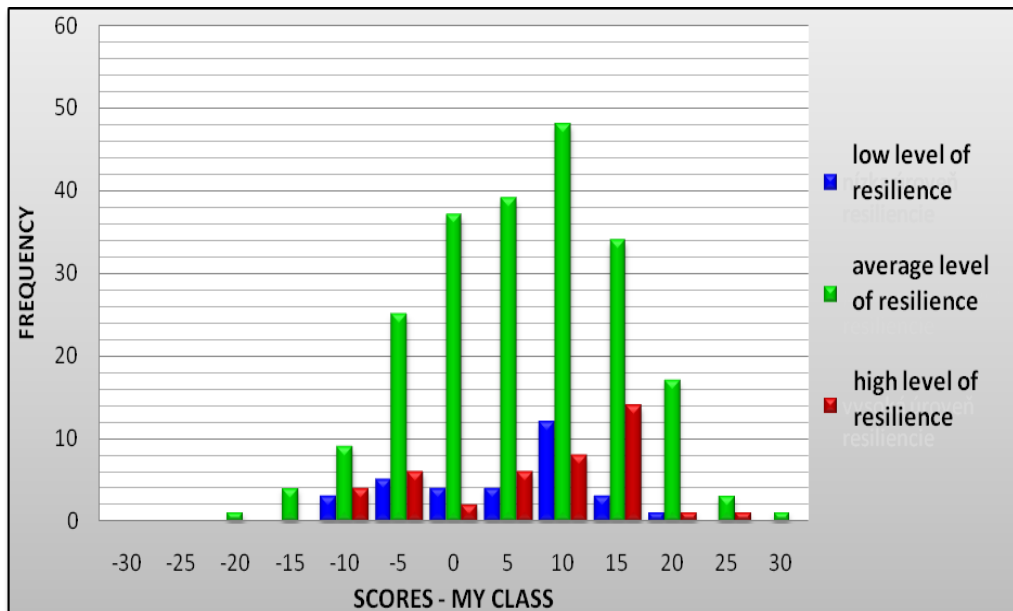
Figure 6 *Questionnaire Part 4 – School*



Students with low level of resilience perceived school activities more negatively than their more resilient schoolmates, though conditions they had were exactly the same. It means that, again, subjective appraisal plays a significant role. The question is whether it is possible that schools paid more attention to active, more resilient students achieving good results and did not respect the needs of less resilient students.

The fifth part of the questionnaire focused on class climate, tolerance and respect between schoolmates, cohesion of the class and the presence or absence of social pathology. We did not find any significant differences between students with low level of resilience (median score = 5) and students with average or high levels of resilience (median score = 5). The results show that the extent of their satisfaction in the class is not dependent on the level of their resilience. We expected that students with low level of resilience would not be happy in their class and would feel being hurt.

Figure 7 *Questionnaire Part 5 – My class*

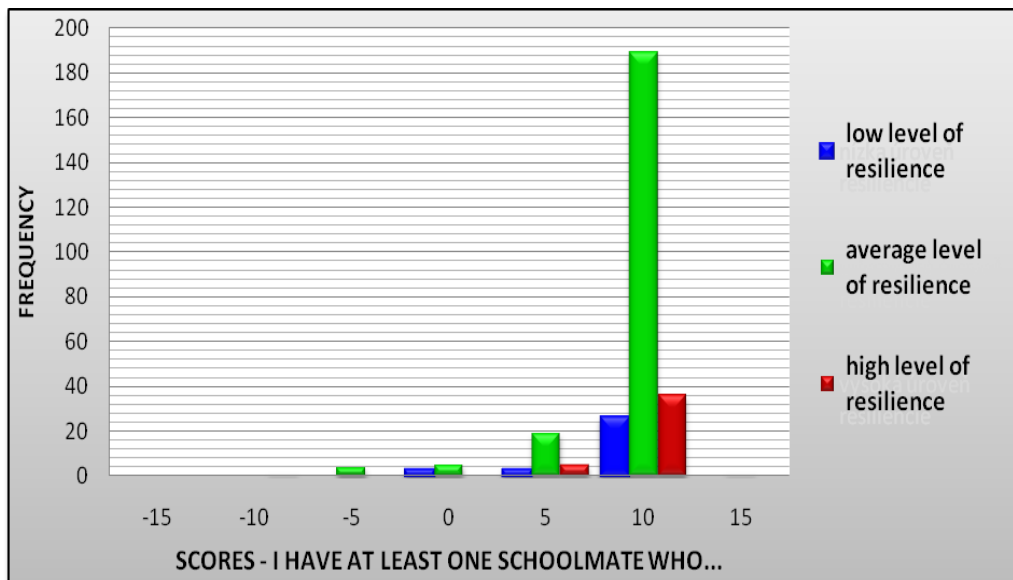


Though 31.85% of students perceived their class climate negatively, the majority of students (68.15%) were happy in their class environment. This fact supports our findings in other parts of the questionnaire because class climate is influenced by school climate and good relationships minimize the occurrence of social pathology in both the school and class environments. Teachers are responsible for class climate too;

their ability to intervene before a conflict becomes serious and willingness to help to solve problems in the class belong to the important protective factors. As students rated their teachers positively, we assume that most of them did their jobs well and tried to provide their students safe environments.

It is very important to have someone who can share one's problems and experiences with. In the sixth part of the questionnaire we asked the students if they had social support derived from intimate relationships within their class environment. The results were unexpected; we did not find any significant differences between the students with low level of resilience (median score = 10) and the group of students with average and high levels of resilience (median score = 10), though a close friend is considered to be one of the most important protective factors that social environment can offer. It is generally accepted that peers play a significant role in teenagers' lives, so we presumed that students with low level of resilience would not have schoolmates who they could share their problems with, who they could ask for help, or who they could spend their time with both inside and outside the school, and consequently they would have problems when facing adversity.

Figure 8 *Questionnaire Part 6 – I have at least one schoolmate who...*

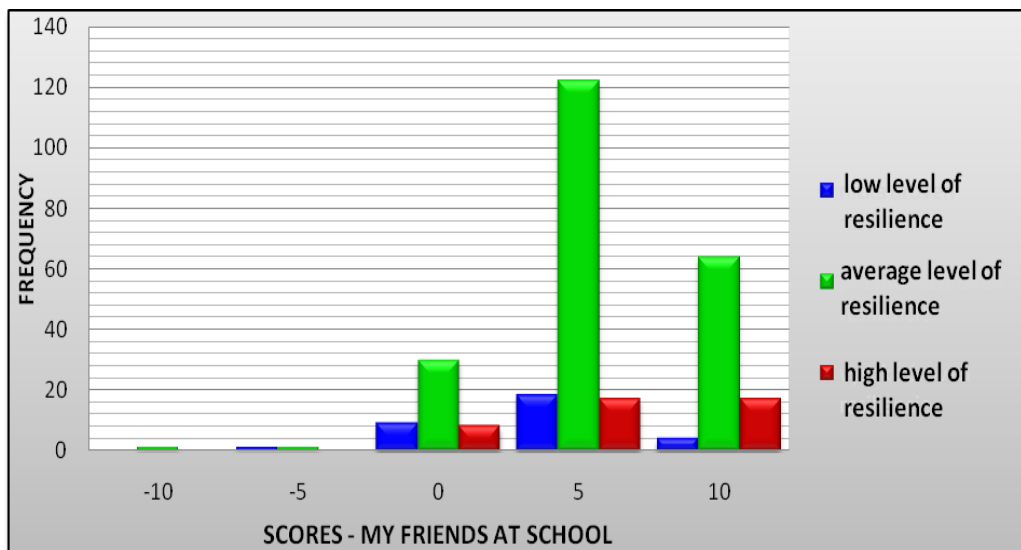


The vast majority of students (95.55%), regardless the level of their resilience, achieved a positive score. It means that they had a good relationship with at least one of their schoolmates. Based on the results of the fifth and the sixth parts of the questionnaire, we think that a friend among the schoolmates cannot be the distinguishing factor between the students with different levels of resilience in social environments with such positive relationships as we detected in all three schools participating in our research.

We have another interesting piece of information after data analysis – only the students with average and high levels of resilience achieved negative scores in this part of the questionnaire. We believe that these students have close friends from other classes or outside the school and such positive relationships partially substitute the lack of an intimate relationship in the class. Though only partially, because students spend a lot of time in school, especially in their class, and having someone who they can be with during the breaks and lunch time makes the hours spent at school more pleasant.

The last part of the questionnaire dealt with the ambitions, attitudes towards learning, and behavior problems of students' friends at school. Our objective was to find out whether the qualities of one's friends and their positive or negative influence could affect one's level of resilience.

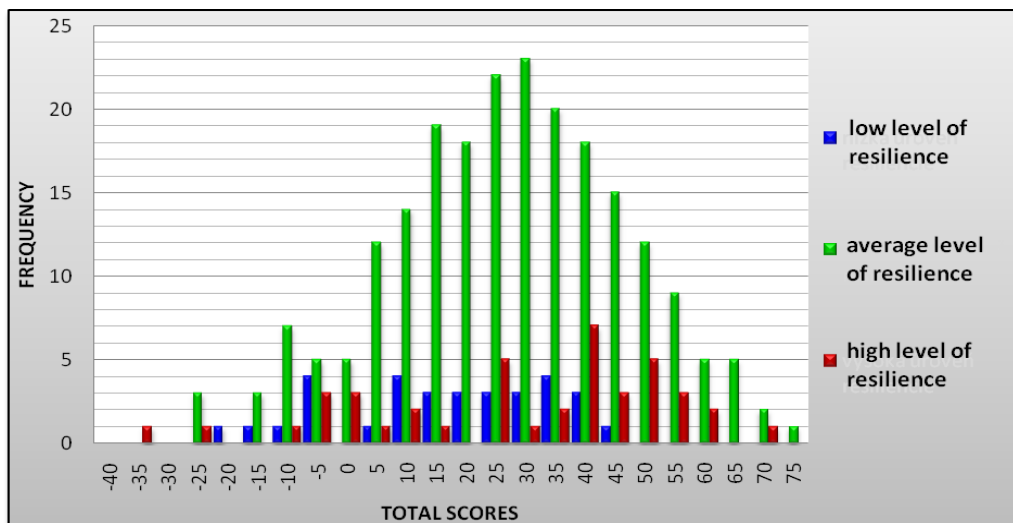
Figure 9 *Questionnaire Part 7 – My friends at school*



We found significant differences between students with low level of resilience (median score = 2) and the group of students with average and high levels of resilience (median score = 4). By confirmation of the hypothesis it was proved that peers influence each other; more students with average and high levels of resilience had as friends the ambitious, successful schoolmates who were not afraid to face challenges and solve difficult situations, achieve good educational results, recognize the value of education and their behavior is socially acceptable. We deduce that the resilient students tend to choose friends with similar personality traits and the same is applicable to less resilient students. It means that also less resilient students tend to gather and in such groups there is not much motivation to improve. This finding is very important for schools and teachers when applying group activities. They should form mixed groups of students with different levels of resilience and give students an opportunity to build friendly relationships with their schoolmates who are more ambitious.

Before questionnaire administration, we correctly presumed that secondary grammar school students would have an ambition to go to university and to find a well-paid job requiring high qualification and the scores in this part of the questionnaire would be positive. Only 12.67% of respondents achieved a negative score. We also presumed that the students with average and high levels of resilience would perceive school climate more positively than the students with low level of resilience not only in individual parts of the questionnaire but in the whole questionnaire, too. 13.36% of students achieved a negative score.

Figure 10 *Questionnaire*



Students with average and high levels of resilience (median score = 27) perceived school climate more positively than their less resilient schoolmates (median score = 17). Our findings show that there is a relationship between the student's resilience level and his/her perception of school climate, therefore schools should make an effort to make school climate as positive as possible and offer sufficient amount of protective factors to enhance the students' resilience.

If considering the parts of the questionnaire, we found a connection between students' perception of school climate and their level of resilience in the following parts: "Relationships", "School", and "My friends at school" but the results from the parts: "In this school there is at least one teacher who ...", "Our teachers ...", "My class", and "I have at least one schoolmate who ..." show that between the subjective interpretation of the quality of these factors and the students' level of resilience there is no relationship.

5 Discussion

The research sample included three secondary grammar schools: a public a private and a religious one from various regions of Slovakia. The sample was homogenous as for the educational results of schools. We would like to stress that the results of our research are not applicable to the whole population of 10th and 11th graders because we used convenience sampling as it was very difficult to find schools willing to take part in the research.

The most important finding is that there is a relationship between students' level of resilience and their perception of the school climate. It is the subjective interpretation of events and conditions offered by schools rather than the exposure to them that is significant because students from the same school or class experienced the same factors differently. The finding that the students with low level of resilience rated school climate more negatively than the group of students with average and high levels of resilience can be explained either by the fact that schools are not able to provide such a social environment which respects the needs of all students and offers activities attractive to everyone or by the fact that lower satisfaction with school climate is affected by a limited capacity to adjust to school environment.

The school climate and the class climate influence each other, but our results show that the subjective interpretation of class climate, but not the school climate, is not affected by a student's resilience level, and vice versa. It was an unexpected finding because we presumed that the students with low level of resilience would not be satisfied with their class environment and would indicate the occurrence of social pathology in their class.

If we compare the data from the first and the fifth part of the questionnaire we get surprising results, too. Students perceive relationships at school level more positively than at class level, though the class is a smaller social unit within a larger one that should make building intimate relationships easier. We thought that more students would have friends in their class and therefore they would feel safer there and would be more satisfied than in the large school community. From a different aspect we find interesting that lower satisfaction in the class did not affect school satisfaction.

It is generally accepted that personal and professional characteristics of teachers have a great impact on school climate, especially their ability to build close relationships with their students, the capacity to detect problems and to help solve conflicts between the students are being emphasized. The students expressed satisfaction with the work of their teachers but we did not find a link between this fact and the students' resilience.

It is well known that the character of school climate is determined by the quality of interpersonal relationships within the institution and the more positive the school environment is, the more resilient the students are. Our findings, in contrast to results of several published studies, say that there is no significant relationship between the students' resilience level and the presence or absence of an intimate relationship with either a teacher or a schoolmate, though the importance of relationships based on mutual trust cannot be questioned. It is probable that those students who do not have a close person at school build friendly relationships outside the school.

Students tend to choose friends who they share personality traits with. The results of our research confirm this assumption. It means that the resilient students' friends have positive influence on them and function as a protective factor while the students with low level of resilience are not motivated by their friends to achieve success. It leads us to the conclusion that if the students with low level of resilience had more ambitious and hardworking friends, they could achieve better results both inside and outside the school and develop a larger scale of coping strategies.

Conclusions

In general, the teachers in Slovakia are not familiar with the phenomenon of resilience so our intention was to gather information and find a connection between the resilience level of Slovak 10th and 11th grade students and the extent of their school satisfaction, i.e. the interpretation of the quality of school environment. Our findings show that, surprisingly, teachers whose students participated in our research applied methods fostering this competence without even knowing about it and so successfully

participated in forming a positive environment providing protective factors to their students.

Despite the difficulties we experienced when creating the research sample, we encountered great interest in our research and possible ways of enhancing students' resilience on the side of teachers. We were glad to see that teachers asked for extra copies of our research tools and intended to use them with the classes not participating in the research, too. It was not only the gathered data that served as a feedback for teachers and school managements because students were eager to express their opinions on the school climate. After the administration, students and teachers lead vivid discussions about the things that should be improved in their school environment. The main objective of this research was to study the levels of student resilience, their school satisfaction, and the extent to which school satisfaction, i.e. subjective interpretation of school climate, influenced the level of students' resilience. Not all our findings are compatible with the results of large studies but we need to consider the specifics of the research sample. We are aware of the fact that some further research must be done with the use of a random sample but despite the limits of our research, the results can serve as a basis for further work as not much has been done in the field of the resilience research in Slovakia.

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