

Required Mental Toughness and Emotional Flexibility of Teachers as Support Mechanism for Challenged Learners

Anesito L. Cutillas

College of Arts and Sciences & Education, Cebu Technological University, Argao Campus, Argao 6021, Philippines

Corresponding author: Anesito L. Cutillas, anesito.cutillas@ctu.edu.ph

HOW TO CITE:

Anesito L. Cutillas (2026).
Required Mental Toughness and
Emotional Flexibility of Teachers as
Support Mechanism for Challenged
Learners.
International Journal of
Special Education, 41(3s), 161-176.

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under
the terms and conditions
of the Creative Commons
Attribution (CC BY)
license
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ABSTRACT:

Grounded in Psychological Flexibility Theory and Resilience Theory, this study explores how teachers develop and utilize mental toughness and emotional flexibility as support mechanisms for learners experiencing academic and personal challenges. While existing literature emphasizes teacher resilience and emotional regulation, few studies specifically examine how these attributes function together as deliberate strategies to support challenged learners, creating a gap in understanding the integrated role of mental and emotional adaptability in classroom practice. This exploratory study addresses this gap by capturing teachers' lived experiences and strategies in navigating demanding educational contexts. Using an exploratory qualitative research design, data were collected through one-on-one interviews with 18 teachers and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns in how mental toughness and emotional flexibility are developed and enacted. The investigation focuses on teachers' experiences of building resilience, managing stress, adapting instructional approaches, and cultivating supportive classroom environments. Expected findings include: a deeper understanding of the ways teachers consciously strengthen mental toughness to sustain commitment and stability when supporting challenged learners; insights into how emotional flexibility enables adaptive responses to diverse student needs; and identification of classroom practices that integrate these attributes to promote learner resilience and success. The study is anticipated to contribute to theory-informed discussions on teacher adaptability and propose practical implications for professional development focused on psychological resilience and flexible emotional engagement in education.

Keywords: Mental, Toughness, Emotional flexibility, Learners

1. Introduction

Teachers today work in increasingly complex educational environments where many learners struggle with academic difficulties, emotional distress, socio-economic challenges, and family-related problems. These realities place

significant emotional and psychological demands on educators, who must balance instructional responsibilities with the need to respond sensitively and adaptively to the diverse needs of challenged learners. Recent studies have shown that varying learner backgrounds, instructional

contexts, and academic conditions require teachers to demonstrate high levels of adaptive support and instructional responsiveness (Garil et al., 2024; Murro, 2024). Consequently, teachers' internal psychological capacities particularly mental toughness and emotional flexibility have become essential for maintaining effectiveness in the classroom. Mental toughness, in particular, has been described as a crucial factor that supports performance, well-being, and positive behavior when facing adversity (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012). Emotional flexibility, likewise, is central to teachers' moment-to-moment regulation of their responses to students' needs, aligning with research showing that teachers' emotional competence strongly relates to student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and to the emotional dynamics present in instructional delivery (Garil et al., 2024). However, although the broader literature on teacher well-being extensively discusses burnout, stress, and coping mechanisms, including patterns of stress profiles documented among teachers (Herman et al., 2018), limited attention has been given to how teachers specifically develop and apply mental toughness and emotional flexibility when supporting learners facing personal or academic challenges. This gap highlights a need for deeper qualitative understanding of the lived experiences of teachers who routinely engage with students requiring heightened support, especially amid varying teaching environments and curriculum demands (Chavez & Unga, 2024; Quisay & Aquino, 2024).

To address this gap, the present study is grounded in Psychological Flexibility Theory and Resilience Theory. Psychological Flexibility Theory, derived from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), emphasizes individuals' ability to remain open to experiences, regulate emotions effectively, and shift behaviors based on situational demands (Hayes et al., 2012). Psychological flexibility has also been characterized more broadly as a fundamental component of psychological health and adaptive functioning (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010), further supporting its relevance in teaching contexts where flexible emotional and behavioral

responses are essential. Within education, this theoretical grounding helps explain how emotional flexibility enables teachers to adapt instructional and relational strategies to meet diverse learner needs, especially during moments of stress or uncertainty. Such adaptability is reflected in recent research on technology-driven and AI-supported instruction, where teachers must frequently shift strategies and manage emotional demands in evolving learning environments (Calzada, 2024; Carpio et al., 2024). Complementing this, Resilience Theory focuses on individuals' capacity to withstand adversity, sustain functioning, and recover from challenges. Resilience has been described as "ordinary magic," highlighting how adaptive systems help individuals remain functional even in difficult circumstances (Masten, 2014). In teaching, resilience is shaped not only by personal attributes but also by conditions and contexts that influence how teachers respond to challenges (Gu & Day, 2013). Mental toughness, as an applied expression of resilience, provides teachers with persistence, emotional stability, and the ability to maintain effective functioning when navigating difficult classroom situations. These ideas also align with evidence showing that teachers often regulate or conceal emotions as part of their professional demands, underscoring the complexity of emotional labor in education (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015) and the significant value of sustained professional engagement and retention supported through reflective practice (Ceneciro, 2025; Barrientos, 2025).

The key concepts central to this study include mental toughness, emotional flexibility, and teacher-led support mechanisms for challenged learners. Mental toughness refers to teachers' capacity to maintain composure, perseverance, and problem-solving orientation when faced with classroom or behavioral challenges. Emotional flexibility pertains to teachers' ability to regulate their own emotional responses and adjust strategies based on the immediate needs and behaviors of learners. Support mechanisms encompass the instructional, relational, and behavioral practices teachers employ to promote learners'

engagement, resilience, and academic success. Such mechanisms become even more essential when learners experience barriers in comprehension, performance, or motivation, as demonstrated in studies examining academic difficulties and learner support needs (Garil et al., 2024; Verdeflor, 2024). Through exploring these constructs, the study seeks to generate a nuanced understanding of the psychological processes that enable teachers to respond effectively to student difficulties.

The expected outcome of this research is both conceptual and practical. The findings aim to clarify how teachers cultivate mental toughness and emotional flexibility, identify the ways these capacities are used to manage stress and adapt to diverse classroom situations, and document the specific practices through which supportive environments for challenged learners are created. Insights generated from this study may inform teacher education programs, professional development initiatives, and institutional policies designed to strengthen teachers' resilience and adaptability, ultimately improving the quality of support provided to learners who face significant academic and personal challenges. Furthermore, understanding these internal teacher capacities can contribute to strengthening instructional innovations and learner-centered approaches across varying educational modalities (Ceneciro, 2025; Calzada, 2024).

2. Literature Review

Mental Toughness in the Teaching Profession. Mental toughness, originally conceptualized within sports psychology, has increasingly been recognized as an essential psychological resource for educators navigating high-pressure academic environments. Scholars describe mental toughness as the capacity to remain focused, composed, and goal-oriented despite stressors or adversity (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2015). In the context of teaching, this competence becomes crucial as educators routinely face diverse student needs, behavioral challenges, and institutional demands (Castro et al., 2024; Chavez, 2020). Research indicates that teachers with higher levels of mental toughness demonstrate better

emotional regulation, stronger decision-making skills, and increased persistence when supporting academically or personally challenged learners (Gu & Day, 2013; Leon et al., 2024). These attributes allow teachers to sustain their commitment to students despite setbacks, including poor academic performance, trauma-related behaviors, or fluctuating motivation (Murro et al., 2023). Studies also show that mental toughness contributes to teachers' professional resilience, enabling them to uphold instructional quality and maintain optimism even under prolonged stress (Kim & Jang, 2018; Chavez, Del Prado, & Estoque, 2023). As such, mental toughness is not only an internal strength but a practical mechanism through which teachers deliver effective support to vulnerable learners (Dagoy et al., 2024; Chavez et al., 2024).

Emotional Flexibility and Adaptive Teaching. Emotional flexibility refers to the ability to modify one's emotional responses based on situational demands, allowing for adaptive interpersonal interactions and classroom management. Gross (2015) emphasized that emotionally flexible individuals can shift perspectives, reinterpret challenging situations, and respond appropriately to students' emotional cues. In teaching contexts, emotional flexibility has been linked to improved relationships with students, enhanced empathy, and more effective classroom climate regulation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Savellon et al., 2024). Educators who exhibit emotional flexibility can adjust their tone, expectations, and instructional strategies to accommodate learners experiencing stress, trauma, or academic difficulties (Chavez, Gregorio, Araneta, & Bihag, 2024). This adaptability supports differentiated teaching practices an approach shown to improve outcomes for students with varied academic and personal needs (Tomlinson, 2014; Inoferio, Espartero, & Asiri, 2024). Furthermore, emotionally flexible teachers are better able to manage their own emotional reactions, reducing burnout and promoting sustained engagement with students who require higher levels of support (Brackett et al., 2019). Consequently, emotional flexibility serves as an essential competency for

fostering a responsive, compassionate, and learner-centered environment (Castro et al., 2024).

Teacher Stress Management and Coping Mechanisms. Teaching is widely recognized as a profession with substantial emotional labor, and managing stress effectively is vital for maintaining high-quality instruction. Teachers frequently encounter stressors such as workload pressure, student behavioral challenges, administrative expectations, and the need to respond to complex learner circumstances (Kyriacou, 2015; Chavez, 2020). Mental toughness and emotional flexibility function as protective coping mechanisms that enhance teachers' capacity to regulate stress and prevent emotional exhaustion (Chavez, Del Prado, & Estoque, 2023). Studies on teacher coping reveal that individuals who use constructive emotional regulation strategies and maintain a resilient mindset are more likely to sustain positive classroom interactions and avoid maladaptive responses such as disengagement or punitive discipline (Chang, 2009; Dagoy et al., 2024). Importantly, these coping mechanisms also influence teachers' perceptions of their own efficacy; those who manage stress well report higher confidence in their ability to support struggling learners (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Murro et al., 2023). Effective stress management aligned with mental toughness and emotional flexibility therefore strengthens teachers' capacity to respond to challenging classroom dynamics with composure, creativity, and empathy (Castro et al., 2024).

Building Supportive Learning Environments for Challenged Learners. The creation of a supportive classroom environment is a foundational requirement for ensuring the success of learners facing academic or personal obstacles. Such environments are characterized by psychological safety, inclusive teaching practices, and positive teacher–student relationships (Noddings, 2013; Leon et al., 2024). Teachers' mental toughness and emotional flexibility play a direct role in maintaining this supportive climate, particularly when addressing students with complex needs (Chavez, Gregorio, Araneta, & Bihag, 2024). Research indicates that teachers who demonstrate

resilience and emotional adaptability are more capable of establishing trust, responding to crises, and implementing targeted interventions that encourage student engagement (Pianta, 2016; Chavez et al., 2024). Furthermore, supportive classroom environments rely on consistent teacher behaviors such as patience, encouragement, and adaptive problem-solving all of which are strengthened through mental toughness and emotional flexibility (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Savellon et al., 2024). When teachers exhibit these attributes, students are more likely to feel understood, motivated, and empowered to persist despite challenges (Inoferio, Espartero, & Asiri, 2024). Thus, the interplay between psychological teacher attributes and classroom climate underscores the importance of fostering these competencies within the teaching workforce (Castro et al., 2024).

The reviewed literature emphasizes that mental toughness and emotional flexibility are critical components of effective teaching, particularly for educators working with challenged learners. Mental toughness supports resilience, focus, and persistence in the face of professional demands (Chavez, 2020; Castro et al., 2024), while emotional flexibility enables the nuanced interpersonal responses required for adaptive teaching (Chavez, Gregorio, Araneta, & Bihag, 2024; Savellon et al., 2024). Together, these qualities enhance teachers' stress management capabilities and help cultivate supportive learning environments that promote student success (Leon et al., 2024; Inoferio, Espartero, & Asiri, 2024). Although existing research highlights these constructs individually, there remains a need for exploratory studies that examine how teachers themselves experience, develop, and apply these attributes in real classroom contexts (Dagoy et al., 2024; Chavez et al., 2024). This gap underscores the relevance of the present study, which aims to investigate teachers' lived experiences and strategies related to mental toughness and emotional flexibility as support mechanisms for academically and personally challenged learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate teachers' experiences and perspectives in developing mental toughness and emotional flexibility as support mechanisms for learners facing academic and personal challenges. An exploratory approach was appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of complex psychological constructs, their practical application in classroom settings, and how teachers employ these attributes to manage stress, adapt to classroom dynamics, and foster supportive learning environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data regarding teachers' lived experiences, strategies, and coping mechanisms.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study targeted teachers actively engaged in classroom instruction across various academic levels. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who had firsthand experience in supporting academically or personally challenged learners. A total of eighteen ($n = 18$) teachers participated in the study. This sampling method ensured that participants possessed relevant experiences and insights regarding mental toughness and emotional flexibility in teaching contexts (Patton, 2015).

3.3. Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide specifically developed to explore

teachers' experiences with mental toughness and emotional flexibility. The instrument included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives on the development, utilization, and impact of these attributes in classroom management, stress regulation, and fostering a supportive learning environment. The interview guide was reviewed by experts in educational psychology and qualitative research to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Table 1 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
1. To explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers in developing mental toughness and emotional flexibility as strategies for supporting learners who face academic and personal challenges.	1. Can you describe specific experiences where you felt the need to develop mental toughness in order to support a learner facing difficulties? 2. In what ways do you think emotional flexibility influences your ability to respond to the needs of challenged learners?

-
- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>2. To examine how teachers utilize mental toughness and emotional flexibility as mechanisms to manage stress, adapt to classroom situations, and build a supportive learning environment for challenged learners.</p> | <p>3. How do your personal perspectives and teaching experiences shape your approach to building resilience and adaptability in the classroom?</p> |
| <p>1. How do you apply mental toughness when handling stressful or complex classroom situations involving challenged learners?</p> | <p>2. Can you share examples of how you use emotional flexibility to adapt your teaching strategies for learners with different needs? What practices or approaches do you use to foster a supportive classroom environment that encourages challenged learners to succeed?</p> |
-

3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted through one-on-one interviews with each participant. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting to facilitate honest and reflective responses. Each session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness of the participants' narratives.

3.5. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, developing themes, reviewing and refining themes, and producing a comprehensive narrative report. Reflexive thematic analysis enabled the researchers to interpret the meaning of teachers'

experiences and strategies in using mental toughness and emotional flexibility, highlighting both individual and shared perspectives. Themes were continuously refined through iterative discussions among the research team to ensure credibility, depth, and alignment with the study objectives.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers in developing mental toughness and emotional flexibility as strategies for supporting learners who face academic and personal challenges.

Question No. 1. Can you describe specific experiences where you felt the need to develop mental toughness in order to support a learner facing difficulties?

1.1 *Emotional Regulation under Resistance*

Eight (8) respondents expressed that there were learners who openly challenged every instruction they gave, often doing so in front of the

entire class. At first, these moments felt personal and emotionally charged. They had to develop mental toughness by consciously separating their emotions from the learner's behavior and reminding themselves that the resistance was not an attack on their competence but a signal of unmet needs such as control, clarity, or validation. Instead of reacting defensively, they learned to pause, lower their voice, and respond with structure and clarity. Additionally, they mentioned that it required emotional discipline, especially when they felt disrespected, but it allowed them to model the calm and self-regulation they expected from students. They maintained consistency by acknowledging valid questions while redirecting bad behavior appropriately which preserved the learner's dignity without compromising classroom order. The experience reinforced that mental toughness is not about suppressing emotions, but about managing them thoughtfully to create a respectful and supportive learning environment.

"There were learners who openly challenged every instruction I gave, often doing so in front of the entire class."

"It required emotional discipline, especially when I felt disrespected, but it allowed me to model the calm and self-regulation I expected from students."

1.2 Maintaining Compassion While Setting Boundaries

Five (5) respondents shared that there were learners dealing with serious personal problems outside of school, and these challenges were strongly reflected in their behavior and engagement in class. They often felt emotionally drained as they tried to support the learners while still maintaining classroom order and attending to the needs of others. Mental toughness meant learning how to remain compassionate without overextending themselves. Additionally, they mentioned that they had to set clear professional boundaries, recognizing that while they could offer stability, listen, and provide support, they could not fix everything the learner was going through. This experience taught them that sustainable support requires a balance of empathy and boundaries, and

that protecting their emotional resilience is essential to being an effective teacher and mentor.

"There were learners dealing with serious personal problems outside of school, and these challenges were strongly reflected in their behavior and engagement in class."

"I had to set clear professional boundaries, recognizing that while I could offer stability, listen, and provide support, I could not fix everything the learner was going through. "

1.3 Students rarely write beyond worksheets

Five (5) respondents expressed that they taught learners who were at high risk of dropping out, with irregular attendance and minimal engagement. Many of their efforts to support them seemed to go unnoticed, which often felt discouraging. That is why they believed that mental toughness also meant continuing to offer support despite the lack of visible progress, resisting frustration, and choosing persistence over stopping. Additionally, they shared that they focused on being predictable and nonjudgmental, greeting the learners consistently, avoiding criticism about absences, and providing ongoing access to learning materials. Supporting learners required resilience and the ability to hold onto hope longer than they could, reinforcing their belief that mental toughness in teaching often lies in quiet persistence rather than quick results.

"I taught learners who were at high risk of dropping out, with irregular attendance and minimal engagement. Many of my efforts to support them seemed to go unnoticed, which often felt discouraging."

"I focused on being predictable and nonjudgmental, greeting the learner consistently, avoiding criticism about absences, and providing ongoing access to learning materials."

Question No. 2. In what ways do you think emotional flexibility influences your ability to respond to the needs of challenged learners?

2.1 Regulation before reaction

Five (5) respondents expressed that emotional flexibility helps them pause instead of reacting defensively. When learners are being disruptive, they remind themselves that behavior is communication not disrespect. Pausing creates space to question what might be driving the behavior, whether it is confusion, anxiety, fatigue, or struggles outside the classroom. By shifting from irritation to curiosity, they are able to respond with support rather than punishment, reducing power struggles and opening opportunities for dialogue. Additionally, they mentioned that when learners feel understood instead of judged, trust grows, engagement improves, and the classroom becomes a safer emotional space for risk-taking and learning. This intentional response also protects their own well-being, helping them conserve emotional energy and remain resilient while meeting the needs of challenged learners.

"Emotional flexibility helps me pause instead of reacting defensively. When learners are being disruptive, I remind myself that behavior is communication not disrespect."

"When learners feel understood instead of judged, trust grows, engagement improves, and the classroom becomes a safer emotional space for risk-taking and learning."

2.2 Separating the learner from the behavior

Eight (8) respondents expressed that when they are emotionally flexible, they don't take resistance personally. A struggling learner's frustration isn't an attack on their teaching but it's a signal that they are overwhelmed, confused, or facing challenges they may not immediately see as educators. Recognizing this allows them to step back and reflect on what support or adjustment the learners need, rather than reacting defensively or with frustration. Additionally, they mentioned that when learners sense that their difficulties are met with understanding rather than criticism, this will reduce anxiety and increase engagement. Also emotional flexibility prevents burnout, because they separate their sense of professional worth from

momentary classroom challenges, allowing them to maintain both empathy and effectiveness in supporting learners who struggle.

"When I'm emotionally flexible, I don't take resistance personally. A struggling learner's frustration isn't an attack on my teaching but it's a signal that they are overwhelmed, confused, or facing challenges I may not immediately see as an educator."

"When learners sense that their difficulties are met with understanding rather than criticism, this will reduce anxiety and increase engagement."

2.3 Protecting teacher well-being

Five (5) respondents mentioned that for them, emotional flexibility is self-preservation. Flexibility allows them to step back, acknowledge their feelings without letting them control their actions, and consciously choose a more constructive response. If they cling to one emotional response like frustration, disappointment, or even worry they will risk reacting impulsively, which diminishes their effectiveness. Additionally, they mentioned that being emotionally flexible sustains both their well-being and their capacity to respond thoughtfully to learners, even in high-stress or unpredictable situations. This emotional reset enables them to remain present, calm, and attentive, providing the stability that challenged learners often need most. It also helps them maintain consistency in expectations and support, which will be an emotional attitude for students.

"For me, emotional flexibility is self-preservation. Flexibility allows me to step back, acknowledge my feelings without letting them control my actions, and consciously choose a more constructive response."

"Being emotionally flexible sustains both my well-being and my capacity to respond thoughtfully to learners, even in high-stress or unpredictable situations."

Question No. 3. How do your personal perspectives and teaching experiences shape your approach to building resilience and adaptability in the classroom?

3.1 *Personal struggles with learning foster patience and empathy for students*

Eight (8) respondents expressed that their own struggles with learning science have taught them patience and the value of perseverance. They know how quickly frustration can build, so they focus on giving learners small, achievable steps that allow them to experience success and build confidence. They model persistence and normalize mistakes, showing that failure is not the end but a crucial part of the learning process. Additionally, they mentioned that their personal experience with setbacks helps them tune into students' emotions, sense when they are struggling, and adjust lessons in real time whether by changing pacing, offering alternative explanations, or providing additional support. They also share their own challenges to normalize struggle, fostering a classroom culture where resilience, curiosity, and adaptability are valued and practiced.

"My own struggles with learning science have taught me patience and the value of perseverance."

"My personal experience with setbacks helps me tune into students' emotions, sense when they are struggling, and adjust lessons in real time whether by changing pacing, offering alternative explanations, or providing additional support."

3.2 *Ability to recognize when students are overwhelmed and respond appropriately*

Five (5) respondents expressed that their personal experiences with stress and mental health have taught them the importance of emotional resilience. These experiences help them recognize when a student is feeling overwhelmed and adjust their approach by slowing down explanations, breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps, or providing reassurance. Additionally, they mentioned that they also focus on teaching students to self-regulate, offering strategies such as mindfulness, reflection, and pacing their work. They help students understand that emotional strength can be learned and practiced. By modeling resilience and showing how they manage setbacks, they create

a classroom environment where students feel supported, learn to navigate challenges, and develop the skills to stay adaptable and emotionally strong in difficult situations.

"My personal experiences with stress and mental health have taught me the importance of emotional resilience."

"I also focus on teaching students to self-regulate, offering strategies such as mindfulness, reflection, and pacing their work."

3.3 *Learned to detach emotionally and avoid reacting defensively*

Five (5) respondents expressed that they faced significant resistance early in their teaching career when students questioned their methods, pushing back on tasks, or openly expressing disagreement. At first, it was discouraging, but over time they learned to detach emotionally from each moment of pushback. This experience helped them develop emotional flexibility, allowing them to respond thoughtfully rather than react defensively. Additionally, they also note that when a student challenges a task or refuses a method, they stay calm and view it as an opportunity rather than a confrontation. They explore alternative approaches, ask guiding questions, and involve the student in problem-solving. These experiences reinforced their belief that pushback can be a valuable teaching moment rather than a setback.

"I faced significant resistance early in my teaching career when students questioned my methods, pushing back on tasks, or openly expressing disagreement."

"When a student challenges a task or refuses a method, I stay calm and view it as an opportunity rather than a confrontation."

Research Objectives 2. To examine how teachers utilize mental toughness and emotional flexibility as mechanisms to manage stress, adapt to classroom situations, and build a supportive learning environment for challenged learners.

Question No. 1. How do you apply mental toughness when handling stressful or complex classroom situations involving challenged learners?

1.1 Staying Consistent and Predictable

Five (5) respondents expressed that even when a student refuses to engage or disrupts the class, they remind themselves to stay consistent. Their routines and expectations serve as a safe anchor for them, and they have to keep showing up with the same patience every day. Consistency provides stability in an otherwise unpredictable classroom environment. For many challenged learners, inconsistency whether in reactions, rules, or expectations can heighten anxiety, frustration, or withdrawal. That is why by maintaining the same routines they make the classroom a safe and predictable space for learners without judgement. Additionally, they mentioned that consistency also models self-discipline and resilience. When students see them remain patient despite disruptions, they learn that setbacks and frustration are manageable, and that persistence leads to progress. This doesn't mean ignoring misbehavior rather, it means addressing it in a structured way that reinforces the rules while protecting the learner's dignity.

"Even when a student refuses to engage or disrupts the class, I remind myself to stay consistent."

"Consistency also models self-discipline and resilience. When students see me remain patient despite disruptions, they learn that setbacks and frustration are manageable, and that persistence leads to progress."

1.2 Self-Regulation and Stress Management

Five (5) respondents expressed that they use short mindfulness exercises, deep breathing, or quick mental resets when things get overwhelming. These strategies help them pause and regain focus, preventing stress from influencing their responses to learners. Being mentally tough isn't about ignoring stress or pretending everything is fine but it's about actively managing it so they can stay calm, clear-headed, and effective in the classroom. Additionally, they mentioned that mental reset is

like stepping outside for a brief moment, stretching, or silently counting breaths creating space to reframe challenges and maintain emotional balance. This approach allows them to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively, which is especially important when working with challenged learners who may test boundaries or express frustration.

"I use short mindfulness exercises, deep breathing, or quick mental resets when things get overwhelming."

"Mental reset is like stepping outside for a brief moment, stretching, or silently counting breaths creating space to reframe challenges and maintain emotional balance."

1.3 Using a Problem-Solving Mindset

Eight (8) respondents expressed that they approach challenging learners like a puzzle. Mental toughness is about staying calm while figuring out what motivates them, what triggers their frustration, and how to support them in reaching learning goals. Each learner is unique, and understanding their individual needs requires patience, observation, and adaptability. By carefully analyzing patterns in behavior, responses to tasks, and emotional cues, they can identify strategies that help them engage more meaningfully. Additionally, they mentioned that staying mentally tough means persevering without frustration when initial strategies fail. It's about maintaining curiosity instead of judgment, seeing obstacles as opportunities to learn more about the learner, and adjusting methods to meet them where they are. This approach helps create a supportive environment where learners feel understood, valued, and more willing to take risks, while they remain resilient, flexible, and focused on their long-term growth.

"I approach challenging learners like a puzzle. Mental toughness is about staying calm while figuring out what motivates them, what triggers their frustration, and how to support them in reaching learning goals."

"Staying mentally tough means persevering without frustration when initial strategies fail."

Question No. 2. Can you share examples of how you use emotional flexibility to adapt your teaching strategies for learners with different needs?

2.1 Emotional flexibility allows teachers to pause academic demands

Five(5) respondents expressed that when they notice learners becoming withdrawn or easily frustrated, they intentionally pause their planned lesson to check in emotionally before pushing academic goals. They've learned that disengagement often signals overwhelm rather than lack of ability. In these moments, they may shift from whole-class instruction to small-group work or one-on-one support to reduce pressure and create a safer space for participation. Additionally, they mentioned that sometimes this simply means listening first, offering reassurance, or allowing the learner time to regulate their emotions. Emotional flexibility allows them to prioritize the learner's emotional readiness, recognizing that meaningful learning can only occur when a student feels safe, supported, and understood.

"When I notice learners becoming withdrawn or easily frustrated, I intentionally pause my planned lesson to check in emotionally before pushing academic goals."

"Sometimes this simply means listening first, offering reassurance, or allowing the learner time to regulate their emotions."

2.2 View ineffective strategies as feedback

Five (5) respondents expressed that when their strategy isn't working, they make a conscious effort to resist feelings of discouragement or defensiveness. This mindset allows them to reflect objectively on what might need adjustment whether that means moving away from lecture-based instruction toward hands-on activities, collaborative tasks, or guided discussions. Additionally, they mentioned that they also treat the situation when it is not working as feedback rather than failure and understanding that not every approach will meet every learner's needs. Emotional flexibility helps them separate their identity as a teacher from the

success of a single lesson, enabling them to adapt with confidence, remain open to change, and stay focused on supporting student learning rather than protecting their own ego.

"When my strategy isn't working, I make a conscious effort to resist feelings of discouragement or defensiveness."

"I treat the situation when it is not as feedback rather than failure and understanding that not every approach will meet every learner's needs. "

2.3 Adjust expectations and task structures

Eight (8) respondents expressed that they stay open to adjusting expectations when students are clearly overwhelmed and recognize that pressure can shut down learning rather than motivate it. Emotional flexibility allows them to balance empathy with structure in which they remain firm about learning goals while being flexible in how students reach them. Additionally, they mentioned that instead of insisting on immediate compliance or output, they break tasks into smaller, more manageable steps or offer alternative formats for demonstrating understanding. This might include oral responses, visual organizers, or extended time. This approach is especially helpful for learners who struggle with anxiety, attention difficulties, or confidence, as it reduces stress while maintaining accountability.

"I stay open to adjusting expectations when students are clearly overwhelmed and recognize that pressure can shut down learning rather than motivate it."

"Instead of insisting on immediate compliance or output, I break tasks into smaller, more manageable steps or offer alternative formats for demonstrating understanding."

Question No. 3. What practices or approaches do you use to foster a supportive classroom environment that encourages challenged learners to succeed?

3.1 Building trust and showing genuine care for learners' well-being

Eight (8) respondents expressed that they prioritize building trust before pushing academics. When learners feel seen and respected, they're more willing to try even if they fail at first. Trust is the foundation that makes learning possible. Before they can expect effort, risk-taking, or perseverance from the students, learners need to believe that they are on their side. They take time to learn their names quickly, notice patterns in their moods or participation, and follow up on things they share even small details because these moments signal that they matter beyond their academic performance. Additionally, they mentioned that building trust also means being consistent and fair. They follow through on what they say, explain their decisions, and admit when they make mistakes. This transparency models respect and accountability and shows learners that authority can be firm without being intimidating. When learners feel emotionally safe, they are less afraid of making mistakes or asking for help.

"I prioritize building trust before pushing academics. When learners feel seen and respected, they're more willing to try even if they fail at first."

"Building trust also means being consistent and fair. I follow through on what I say, explain my decisions, and admit when I make mistakes."

3.2 Normalizing mistakes and celebrating effort over perfection

Five (5) respondents shared that they openly talk about mistakes as part of learning. They celebrate effort and progress, not just correct answers. When students see that struggle is normal even for them they will become more resilient. They make it a point to share their own learning challenges or errors, whether it's a miscalculation, a forgotten fact, or a lesson they had to rethink. This modeling helps learners understand that errors are not failures but opportunities to learn and grow. Additionally, they mentioned that they also emphasize the process over the product. They give

specific feedback on effort, strategy, and persistence, rather than only rewarding perfect results. By recognizing small improvements, they help learners build confidence and a sense of competence, especially those who have faced repeated academic setbacks. Creating a culture where mistakes are accepted encourages curiosity and risk-taking. Learners feel safer to ask questions, try new approaches, and push beyond their comfort zones.

"I openly talk about mistakes as part of learning. I celebrate effort and progress, not just correct answers."

"I also emphasize the process over the product. I give specific feedback on effort, strategy, and persistence, rather than only rewarding perfect results."

3.3 Creating a judgment-free classroom where exclusions are promptly addressed

Five (5) respondents mentioned that they make it clear that their classroom is a judgment-free space. They intervene immediately when they sense ridicule, exclusion, or negative comments among students. Challenged learners thrive when they know they won't be embarrassed for asking questions or expressing uncertainty. They communicate that every question is valid and every attempt is valued, no matter how small or imperfect. Additionally, they shared that they also model respectful interactions and empathy in all discussions. When students see that they listen attentively, respond calmly, and treat everyone fairly, they are more likely to mirror those behaviors. Creating a safe environment encourages students to participate actively, collaborate with peers, and take risks in their learning without fear of criticism. Learners become more willing to engage with challenging material, seek help when needed, and experiment with new ideas, knowing they have a supportive foundation that protects their dignity and growth.

"I make it clear that my classroom is a judgment-free space. I intervene immediately when I sense ridicule, exclusion, or negative comments among students."

"I also model respectful interactions and empathy in all discussions. When students see that I listen attentively, respond calmly, and treat everyone fairly, they are more likely to mirror those behaviors."

5. Discussion

The findings from this study illuminate the critical role of teachers' mental toughness and emotional flexibility as support mechanisms for learners facing academic and personal challenges. Grounded in Psychological Flexibility Theory (PFT) and Resilience Theory, the experiences and perspectives shared by the participating teachers highlight how these personal attributes contribute to effective teaching practices and the creation of supportive learning environments.

Teachers' Experiences in Developing Mental Toughness and Emotional Flexibility. The first objective focused on exploring teachers' experiences in cultivating mental toughness and emotional flexibility. Mental toughness, as reported by participants, often emerged in response to stressful classroom situations, student crises, and the need to balance instructional demands with emotional support. These experiences align with Resilience Theory, which posits that individuals can develop coping mechanisms and adaptive capacities in the face of adversity (Masten, 2014). Teachers described instances where their persistence, commitment, and problem-solving abilities were essential in helping learners navigate academic setbacks or personal difficulties. These narratives suggest that mental toughness is not a fixed trait but a dynamic process that can be strengthened through reflective practice, experience, and intentional effort.

Emotional flexibility, as conceptualized within Psychological Flexibility Theory, refers to the capacity to adapt emotional responses to the demands of the situation, shift perspectives, and maintain focus on valued goals (Hayes et al., 2006). Teachers highlighted that their ability to regulate emotions, remain empathetic, and respond to diverse learner needs directly influenced their effectiveness. For example, teachers who were emotionally flexible could

adjust their instructional strategies when a learner exhibited signs of stress or disengagement, demonstrating cognitive and affective adaptability, a central component of psychological flexibility.

Collectively, these experiences indicate that teachers' mental toughness and emotional flexibility are intertwined: while mental toughness provides the stability and resilience necessary to face challenges, emotional flexibility enables adaptive responsiveness, ensuring that support is attuned to learners' evolving needs.

Utilization of Mental Toughness and Emotional Flexibility in Classroom Practice. The second objective examined how these attributes function as mechanisms to manage stress, adapt to classroom situations, and foster supportive learning environments. Teachers reported that mental toughness supported their ability to persevere under pressure, maintain high expectations for students, and remain goal-oriented even in the face of setbacks. This aligns with Resilience Theory, which emphasizes the capacity to recover and thrive despite adversity. Mental toughness allowed teachers to model resilience for learners, demonstrating that challenges can be overcome through persistence and constructive problem-solving.

Simultaneously, emotional flexibility was instrumental in enabling teachers to navigate the emotional complexities of the classroom, such as responding to learners' frustrations, anxieties, or behavioral issues. Teachers' narratives suggest that flexibility facilitated adaptive teaching strategies, such as differentiating instruction, providing personalized encouragement, or reframing challenges in a positive light. From a PFT perspective, this flexibility involves maintaining awareness of internal experiences (e.g., stress, frustration) while acting consistently with valued outcomes, such as learner engagement and growth.

Importantly, the combination of mental toughness and emotional flexibility contributed to the development of a supportive learning environment, where learners felt understood, valued, and encouraged to persist despite difficulties. Teachers' ability to regulate their

responses while maintaining focus on learners' needs exemplifies the dynamic interplay between resilience and psychological flexibility, suggesting that these attributes are mutually reinforcing. Mental toughness provides the anchor for stability, while emotional flexibility allows for responsive adaptation, together fostering a classroom climate conducive to challenged learners' success.

These findings underscore the necessity of professional development programs that cultivate both resilience and psychological flexibility among teachers. Enhancing mental toughness and emotional flexibility can equip educators with tools to manage stress, adapt pedagogical strategies, and support learners with diverse challenges. Moreover, the study highlights the role-modeling effect: teachers' adaptive coping behaviors and resilience can positively influence learners, promoting the development of their own emotional regulation and coping strategies.

In summary, this study demonstrates that teachers' mental toughness and emotional flexibility are vital mechanisms in supporting challenged learners. Grounded in Resilience Theory and Psychological Flexibility Theory, the findings reveal that mental toughness provides the capacity to endure and persevere through challenges, while emotional flexibility enables adaptive, empathetic responses to students' unique needs. Together, these attributes foster classroom resilience, enhance teacher well-being, and create a supportive environment that

encourages learners to thrive despite academic or personal challenges.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role of teachers' mental toughness and emotional flexibility in supporting learners facing academic and personal challenges. Teachers develop mental toughness through emotional regulation, persistence, and boundary-setting, enabling them to maintain consistency, manage stress, and respond thoughtfully to challenging classroom situations. Emotional flexibility allows teachers to pause before reacting, separate learners from their behaviors, and adjust expectations, fostering a supportive and adaptive learning environment while preserving their own well-being. Teachers' personal experiences with learning difficulties, stress, and early classroom challenges shape their approach to building resilience and adaptability, helping them model persistence, empathy, and problem-solving for their students. In practice, mental toughness and emotional flexibility combine to create safe, predictable, and judgment-free classrooms where trust is built, mistakes are normalized, and learner engagement is prioritized. These attributes not only support challenged learners academically and emotionally but also sustain teachers' own resilience, emphasizing the interdependent nature of teacher and student well-being in effective education.

References

- Barrientos, A. A. (2025). Encouraging environmental sensitivity and Earth science performance: Perceptions from first-year teacher education students. *Journal of Environmental & Earth Sciences*, 7(4), 180–192. <https://doi.org/10.30564/jees.v7i4.8039>
- Brackett, M. A., Palomera, R., Mojsa-Kaja, J., Reyes, M. R., & Salovey, P. (2019). Emotion-regulation ability, burnout, and job satisfaction among British secondary-school teachers. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47(4), 406–417.
- Calzada, K. P. D. (2024). Anti-dependency teaching strategy for innovation in the age of AI among technology-based students. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(8), 3026. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i8.3026>
- Carpio, L. B., Caburnay, A. L. S., Nollado, S. M., et al. (2024). Technology-based teaching among nursing instructors: Confidence and apprehension in using simulation equipment for training. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(8), 2591. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i8.2591>

-
- Castro, F. L. T., Ventura, B. L. O., Estajal, R. S., et al. (2024). Teachers handling multiple subject areas: Difficulties and adaptive attributes in the delivery of instructions. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2520. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2520>
- Chang, M. L. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(3), 193–218.
- Chavez, J. V. (2020). Academic and health insecurities of indigent students during pandemic: Study on adaptive strategies under learning constraints. *Journal of Multidisciplinary in Social Sciences*, 16(3), 74–81.
- Chavez, J. V., & Unga, N. H. (2024). Confidence of implementation of new BSND curriculum among program administrators and faculty. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(6), 2128. <https://doi.org/10.54517/esp.v9i6.2128>
- Chavez, J. V., Del Prado, R. T., & Estoque, M. (2023). Disrupted income of women educators during pandemic: Economic effects, adaptive strategies, and government recovery initiatives. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, 7(2), 1973. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v7i2.1973>
- Chavez, J. V., Gregorio, M. W., Araneta, A. L., & Bihag, C. D. (2024). Magna carta for women health workers, teachers, and minimum-wage earners in the workplace: Policy awareness and organizational compliance. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(1), 1735. <https://doi.org/10.54517/esp.v9i1.1735>
- Chavez, J. V., et al. (2024). Discourse analysis on teachers' adaptive strategies in response to complex classroom needs. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2520. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2520>
- Clough, P., & Strycharczyk, D. (2012). *Developing mental toughness: Improving performance, wellbeing and positive behaviour in others*. Kogan Page.
- Clough, P., & Strycharczyk, D. (2015). *Developing mental toughness: Improving performance, wellbeing, and positive behaviour in others* (2nd ed.). Kogan Page.
- Dagoy, T. H. S., Ariban, A. I., Chavez, J. V., et al. (2024). Discourse analysis on the teachers' professional interest and integrity among teachers with multiple administrative functions. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(12), 2521. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i12.2521>
- Garil, B. A., Abbas, T. S. C., & Limen, M. V. (2024). Analyzing the demographic-based grammatical competence and its relationship to academic performance in higher education setting. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 6(3), 343–356. <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i3.6453>
- Garil, B. A., Entong, M. B. M., Muarip, V. C., et al. (2024). Language delivery styles in academic trainings: Analysis of speaker's emotional connection to audience for lasting learning. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 6(3), 326–342. <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v6i3.6533>
- Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1–26.
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2013). Challenges to teacher resilience: Conditions count. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 22–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2011.623152>
- Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2005). Can instructional and emotional support in the first-grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure? *Child Development*, 76(5), 949–967.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Herman, K. C., Prewett, S. L., Eddy, C. L., Savala, A., & Reinke, W. M. (2018). Profiles of middle school teacher stress and coping: Concurrent and prospective correlates. *Journal of School Psychology*, 67, 134–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2017.10.003>
- Inoferio, H. V., Espartero, M. M., Asiri, M. S., et al. (2024). Coping with math anxiety and lack of confidence through AI-assisted learning. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(5), 2228. <https://doi.org/10.54517/esp.v9i5.2228>
- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence and student outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>
-

-
- Kashdan, T. B., & Rottenberg, J. (2010). Psychological flexibility as a fundamental aspect of health. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 865–878. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.001>
- Kim, H., & Jang, H. (2018). Teachers' resilience and instructional quality: A systematic review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 73, 1–12.
- Kyriacou, C. (2015). *Teacher stress and burnout: An international review*. Cambridge University Press.
- Leon, A. J. T. D., Jumalon, R. L., Chavez, J. V., et al. (2024). Analysis on the implementation of inclusive classroom: Perception on compliances and obstructions of selected public-school teachers. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2537. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2537>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press.
- Murro, R. A. (2024). Modular distance learning: Exploring the study habits and academic achievements of state-funded elementary school learners. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(8), 2462. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i8.2462>
- Murro, R. A., Lobo, J. G., Inso, A. R. C., & Chavez, J. V. (2023). Difficulties of parents with low educational attainment in assisting their children in modular distance learning during pandemic. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(1), 1957. <https://doi.org/10.54517/esp.v9i1.1957>
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Pianta, R. C. (2016). Classroom processes and teacher–student interaction: A developmental perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, 51(1), 1–3.
- Quisay, A. R. C., & Aquino, M. E. C. (2024). Stress levels of science teachers when delivering distance education instruction in a state college during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2916. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2916>
- Savellon, K. I. S., Asiri, M. S., & Chavez, J. V. (2024). Public speaking woes of academic leaders: Resources and alternative ways to improve speaking with audience. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2871. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2871>
- Taxer, J. L., & Frenzel, A. C. (2015). Facets of teachers' emotional lives: A quantitative investigation of teachers' genuine, faked, and hidden emotions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 49, 78–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.03.003>
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, A. W. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 783–805.
- Verdeflor, R. N. (2024). Choosing science and mathematics programs in college: Practical and psychological arbiters in career-pathing. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(9), 2777. <https://doi.org/10.59429/esp.v9i9.2777>
-