

Teacher Resilience During Educational Reform: A Phenomenological Study

Chapter 4: Findings

Running head: TEACHER RESILIENCE DURING REFORM

Maria Elena Rodriguez

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Education

Department of Educational Leadership
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington

May 2024

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction to Findings

This chapter presents the findings from phenomenological interviews with 12 middle school teachers who experienced the implementation of competency-based education (CBE) reform in their district over a three-year period (2020-2023). The research question guiding this study was: *How do middle school teachers experience and maintain resilience during large-scale educational reform?* Through in-depth analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and teacher reflective journals, five major themes emerged that capture the essence of teachers' lived experiences of resilience during reform. This chapter presents these themes with rich descriptive data drawn directly from participants' voices, organized to illuminate the complex, multifaceted nature of teacher resilience in times of significant institutional change.

Before presenting the themes, I provide brief context about the reform itself and the participants who shared their experiences. The competency-based education reform represented a fundamental shift from traditional time-based instruction to a system where students advance based on demonstrated mastery of specific competencies. This required teachers to redesign curricula, develop new assessment methods, implement flexible pacing systems, and fundamentally reconceptualize their roles from content deliverers to learning facilitators. The reform coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying already substantial implementation challenges as teachers simultaneously navigated remote instruction, hybrid learning models, and eventual return to in-person teaching.

Participant Overview

The 12 participants (Table 4.1) represent diverse teaching experiences, subject areas, and demographic backgrounds, providing rich variation in perspectives while sharing the common experience of navigating CBE reform implementation.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics and Teaching Contexts

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Subject Area	School Context	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Sarah	15	English Language Arts	Urban, Title I	White	Female
Marcus	8	Mathematics	Suburban, Mixed SES	Black	Male
Jennifer	23	Science	Urban, Title I	White	Female
Diego	6	Social Studies	Urban, Title I	Latinx	Male
Tamara	12	Special Education	Suburban, Mixed SES	Black	Female
Lisa	19	Mathematics	Rural, Low SES	White	Female
Robert	11	Science	Suburban, High SES	White	Male
Aisha	5	English Language Arts	Urban, Title I	Black	Female
Kevin	14	Social Studies	Suburban, Mixed SES	Asian American	Male
Michelle	9	Mathematics	Urban, Title I	Latina	Female
David	22	English Language Arts	Suburban, High SES	White	Male
Patricia	17	Science	Rural, Low SES	White	Female

All participants taught seventh or eighth grade and had experienced at least one complete year of CBE implementation. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 23 years ($M = 13.4$ years), providing perspectives from both newer teachers still developing their professional identities and veteran teachers with established practices disrupted by reform. Seven participants taught in urban Title I schools serving predominantly low-income students and students of color, three taught in suburban schools with mixed socioeconomic demographics, and two taught in rural schools facing economic challenges and teacher isolation.

Overview of Themes

Analysis of interview transcripts, observation notes, and reflective journals revealed five major themes capturing teachers' experiences of resilience during educational reform:

1. **Anchoring to Purpose:** Teachers sustained resilience by connecting reform demands to core professional purpose and student-centered values
2. **Strategic Adaptation:** Resilience involved selective implementation, creative problem-solving, and boundary-setting rather than wholesale compliance
3. **Relational Networks as Lifelines:** Collegial relationships provided emotional support, practical assistance, and collective meaning-making essential for resilience
4. **Temporal Perspectives:** Resilient teachers adopted particular orientations toward time that buffered against reform stress

5. Identity Reconstruction: Sustaining resilience required ongoing renegotiation of professional identity amid changing role expectations

Each theme is presented below with detailed description, illustrative quotations from participants, and analysis connecting findings to theoretical frameworks. Quotations are presented verbatim with minimal editing to preserve participants' authentic voices, though some have been condensed for brevity (indicated by ellipses). Pseudonyms protect participant confidentiality throughout.

Theme 1: Anchoring to Purpose

The first major theme captures how teachers sustained resilience by anchoring themselves to core professional purpose even as reform demands threatened to overwhelm them. Despite experiencing substantial stress, workload intensification, and frequent uncertainty about implementation expectations, resilient teachers maintained connection to fundamental reasons they entered teaching—making positive differences in young people's lives, facilitating learning, and helping students reach their potential. This anchoring to purpose functioned as what participants described as their "North Star," "touchstone," or "why" that oriented them during turbulent change.

Finding Meaning in Reform's Student-Centered Aims

Many participants described initial cynicism about the reform, viewing it as yet another top-down mandate that would increase work without improving student outcomes. However, as implementation progressed, several teachers found ways to connect reform principles to their own student-centered values, transforming the reform from external imposition to meaningful project aligned with their teaching philosophy.

Sarah, a 15-year veteran English teacher, described this transformation:

At first I was so resistant. I thought, "Here we go again, another thing they're making us do that's going to take time away from actually teaching." But as I started really understanding what competency-based meant—that kids could take the time they needed, that we weren't just moving on when 60% got it and leaving the rest behind—I realized this was actually what I've always wanted to do. I've spent 15 years watching kids fail not because they can't learn but because we ran out of time. This reform, for all its chaos and problems, it gives me permission to do what I always thought was right. That realization changed everything for me. (Interview, December 15, 2022)

Sarah's account illustrates how reframing reform demands as aligned with core values transformed her experience from burdensome compliance to meaningful opportunity. Rather than viewing competency-based education as external imposition, she reconstructed it as validation of her long-held beliefs about student learning.

Similarly, Marcus, an eighth-year mathematics teacher, described how focusing on the reform's potential benefits for historically underserved students helped him persist through difficult implementation:

I teach in a school that's 90% students of color, mostly Black and Latinx kids from families that have been economically disadvantaged. I see every day how traditional education systems have failed these kids. So when they told us we were doing CBE, and I read about the equity piece—how it's supposed to address opportunity gaps and give every kid what they need—I thought, "Okay, this could actually help my students." That kept me going through all the trainings, the curriculum redesign, the nights and

weekends. I kept asking myself, "Is this going to help my students?" If I thought yes, I did it. If I thought no, I pushed back or found a workaround. Keeping my students at the center of everything—that's what got me through. (Interview, November 3, 2022)

Marcus's experience demonstrates how anchoring to purpose involved more than abstract commitment—it provided practical decision-making framework for navigating implementation demands. His student-centered orientation guided which aspects of reform he embraced, which he resisted, and how he allocated his limited time and energy.

However, maintaining this connection to purpose required active, ongoing effort. Teachers described needing to deliberately remind themselves of their "why" when faced with frustrating situations. Jennifer, a 23-year veteran science teacher, explained:

There were so many times I wanted to just quit. Not teaching—I love teaching—but quit trying to make this reform work. It would have been easier to close my door and keep doing what I was doing. But I have this sticky note on my computer monitor that says "Why did you become a teacher?" And every time I'd get an email about another meeting or another thing we had to change, I'd see that note and remember: I became a teacher because I believe every kid can learn science, and they deserve a teacher who believes that and works to make it happen. That little reminder—probably sounds silly—but it kept me anchored when everything felt chaotic. (Interview, January 20, 2023)

Jennifer's sticky note represents a concrete strategy for maintaining connection to purpose amid daily chaos. Her account suggests that resilience required not just possessing core values but actively cultivating awareness of them through deliberate practices.

Protecting the Core: Prioritizing Student Relationships

Teachers also described how protecting time and energy for direct student interaction helped them maintain resilience despite increased administrative demands. Reform implementation required extensive meetings, professional development, curriculum development, and documentation—activities that consumed time previously devoted to lesson planning, grading, and informal student interaction. Resilient teachers found ways to protect what they viewed as most essential: building relationships with students and delivering quality instruction.

Diego, a sixth-year social studies teacher, articulated this priority:

The hardest part wasn't learning the new system or redoing my units. The hardest part was all the stuff that pulled me away from kids. We had training after training, meetings during planning periods, committees that met after school. I was spending so much time talking about teaching that I didn't have time to actually teach or be present for my students. At some point I realized I had to draw some boundaries. I started saying no to some committees. I stopped staying after every meeting to chat. I guarded my lunch period like a fortress so I could be in my classroom for kids who needed help or just wanted to talk. Some administrators weren't happy with me, but I had to protect what mattered most—my time with students. That's what kept me sane and reminded me why I was enduring all this change. (Interview, December 8, 2022)

Diego's boundary-setting illustrates how resilience sometimes required selective non-compliance with institutional expectations. By protecting time for direct student interaction, he maintained connection to the relational core of teaching that sustained his professional identity and motivation.

Similarly, Tamara, a 12-year special education teacher, described prioritizing individual student relationships as strategy for managing reform stress:

I work with kids with significant learning disabilities. The paperwork was already overwhelming, and CBE added whole new layers of tracking and documentation. There were days I'd be drowning in data and systems and I'd think, "How is any of this helping my students?" So I made a rule for myself: every day, no matter what, I would have at least one real conversation with each of my kids. Not about schoolwork or competencies—a real conversation about their lives, their interests, how they were doing. Those conversations reminded me why I do this work. They reminded me that underneath all the systems and reforms are actual human beings who need someone to care about them. That human connection—that's what sustained me. (Interview, January 12, 2023)

Tamara's deliberate practice of daily individual conversations represents resilience strategy oriented toward maintaining pedagogical relationships she valued. Rather than allowing reform implementation to completely colonize her attention, she protected space for the interpersonal dimensions of teaching that gave her work meaning.

When Purpose Proves Insufficient

However, anchoring to purpose did not guarantee resilience for all teachers. Two participants who left teaching during the reform period (but agreed to exit interviews) described how disconnection from purpose preceded their departure. One former teacher explained:

I tried to hold onto my reasons for teaching, I really did. But at some point, the gap between what I believed teaching should be and what I was actually doing every day became too wide. I felt like I was spending all my time on compliance—documenting competencies, entering data, attending meetings—and no time on the creative, intellectual, relational parts of teaching I loved. I lost touch with my purpose because my daily reality bore no resemblance to it anymore. When your purpose feels irrelevant to your actual work, you can't anchor to it. There's nothing to grab onto. (Former participant interview, February 28, 2023)

This account suggests that anchoring to purpose sustained resilience only when teachers could enact that purpose, at least partially, within reform structures. When implementation demands completely displaced activities teachers viewed as core to their purpose, anchoring strategies failed. This finding has important implications for understanding resilience limits and conditions under which teachers disengage despite strong initial commitment.

Theoretical Connections

This theme connects to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that autonomous motivation—behavior driven by internal values and interests—proves more sustainable than controlled motivation driven by external pressures. Teachers who connected reform to their autonomous professional purposes experienced implementation as meaningful challenge rather than coercive imposition, supporting their resilience. The theme also aligns with research on teacher commitment (Day et al., 2007) demonstrating that teachers who maintain strong sense of moral purpose demonstrate greater resilience during difficult periods.

However, this theme also reveals limitations of purpose-driven resilience. When organizational contexts prevent teachers from enacting core purposes, anchoring strategies become insufficient for sustaining engagement. This suggests that resilience cannot be purely individual psychological resource—organizational conditions must enable teachers to pursue purposes that sustain their commitment.

Theme 2: Strategic Adaptation

The second major theme captures how teacher resilience involved strategic, selective engagement with reform rather than wholesale compliance or outright resistance. Contrary to both administrative assumptions that teachers should fully implement all reform elements and cynical narratives portraying teachers as recalcitrant resisters, participants demonstrated sophisticated agency in choosing which aspects of reform to embrace, adapt, or circumvent based on professional judgment about student needs and their own capacity.

Selective Implementation Based on Professional Judgment

Rather than attempting to implement every aspect of reform simultaneously or equally, resilient teachers prioritized certain elements they judged most beneficial for students while deprioritizing or delaying others they viewed as less essential or potentially harmful. This selective approach allowed teachers to manage otherwise overwhelming implementation demands.

Lisa, a 19-year veteran mathematics teacher in a rural school, described her strategic approach:

When they rolled out the full CBE model, there were literally hundreds of competencies we were supposed to be tracking for every student. It was mathematically impossible to do all of it and still actually teach. So I made strategic decisions. I focused on the 15-20 most essential competencies—the ones I knew mattered most for my students' mathematical development. Those I tracked carefully, gave detailed feedback on, let kids retry until they mastered them. The other competencies—I checked them off when I saw evidence, but I wasn't obsessing over them. I figured it was better to do fewer things well than to try to do everything and do it all poorly. (Interview, November 29, 2022)

Lisa's approach reflects professional expertise applied to implementation decisions. Rather than deferring to administrative directives or reform designers' intentions, she exercised judgment about which competencies merited intensive focus, prioritizing what she believed would most benefit student learning. This strategic selectivity exemplifies what Priestley et al. (2015) term "teacher agency"—teachers' capacity to make autonomous choices within structural constraints.

Similarly, Robert, an 11-year science teacher, described differentiating his implementation by student population:

I have several class periods, and they're very different. My morning classes have kids who are really self-directed, organized, good at managing their time. My afternoon classes have more kids who struggle with executive function, who need more structure. For my morning classes, I went all-in on student-paced learning—let them move through competencies as fast as they could demonstrate mastery, trusted them to manage their time, gave them lots of autonomy. For my afternoon classes, I provided way more scaffolding—we moved through things more as a whole class, I gave them more structured timelines. Same reform, but adapted to different student needs. Some people might say I wasn't implementing with fidelity, but I think I was being responsive to my students. That's what good teaching is. (Interview, December 16, 2022)

Robert's differentiated implementation demonstrates resilience through adaptation rather than rigid compliance. By modifying reform structures based on student characteristics, he maintained both his professional efficacy and his students' learning while still engaging meaningfully with reform principles.

Creative Problem-Solving and Innovation

Teachers also described how resilience involved creatively adapting reform structures to fit their local contexts rather than simply accepting implementation models as given. This creative adaptation allowed teachers to retain agency and experience implementation as intellectual challenge rather than merely technical compliance.

Aisha, a fifth-year English teacher, described developing innovative assessment approaches:

The district gave us this complicated online system for tracking competencies that was supposed to be the answer to everything. But it was clunky, it crashed constantly, and my students—most of them don't have internet at home, so they couldn't access it outside school. I was supposed to make this system work, but it clearly wasn't working. So I created my own paper-based tracking system that students kept in their binders. Low-tech, but it worked for my kids. They could see their progress, check off competencies, set goals. Some administrators were annoyed I wasn't using the official system, but my students were actually engaging with tracking their learning, which was the whole point. I had to be creative to make reform work in my context. (Interview, January 8, 2023)

Aisha's innovation exemplifies adaptive resilience—recognizing implementation problems, generating solutions, and taking initiative to modify approaches despite potential institutional disapproval. Rather than passively experiencing frustration with inadequate systems, she exercised agency to create tools better suited to her students' needs.

Kevin, a 14-year social studies teacher, described similar creative adaptation:

One thing CBE requires is students resubmitting work until they demonstrate mastery. In theory that's great—kids get to learn from mistakes and try again. In practice, I was drowning in resubmissions. I'd have 150 students submitting work, me giving feedback, them resubmitting, over and over. It was unsustainable. So I created a peer review system where students reviewed each other's work using competency rubrics before submitting to me. They gave each other feedback, identified areas for improvement, and only submitted to me when they thought they were close to mastery. It cut my grading load in half and actually improved the quality of student work because they were getting faster feedback from peers. I was solving a reform implementation problem while also creating a better learning experience. That felt good—like I had some control, some creative space. That sense of agency helped me stay engaged. (Interview, November 18, 2022)

Kevin's peer review system represents resilience through innovation. Rather than simply enduring unsustainable workload, he redesigned assessment processes in ways that aligned with reform principles (opportunities for revision) while managing his capacity. This creative problem-solving provided sense of professional efficacy that sustained engagement.

Protecting Instructional Autonomy

Resilient teachers also described explicitly protecting domains of instructional autonomy despite reform pressures toward standardization. They identified aspects of their practice they considered non-negotiable and defended them even when reform implementation suggested otherwise.

David, a 22-year veteran English teacher, articulated this clearly:

There were certain things about how I teach that I was not willing to change, reform or no reform. The way I run discussions, the books I choose, how I give students space to explore ideas—that's the heart of what I do. Some of the reform training was implying we should standardize everything, teach the same

way, use the same materials. I pushed back hard on that. I explained that competency-based doesn't mean competency-based robots. Students can reach the same competencies through different instructional paths. I protected my instructional autonomy because without it, I'm not really teaching—I'm just implementing someone else's script. That would have killed my resilience immediately. (Interview, February 2, 2023)

David's insistence on preserving instructional autonomy illustrates how resilience sometimes required boundary-setting and explicit resistance to aspects of reform teachers judged problematic. His willingness to "push back hard" demonstrates that resilience involved not just enduring change but actively shaping it within teachers' spheres of influence.

Patricia, a 17-year science teacher, described similar protective strategies:

I teach in a rural school where I'm the only science teacher for my grade level. That isolation could be challenging, but it also gave me freedom. Nobody was looking over my shoulder every day checking if I was following the reform exactly as prescribed. I took that as an opportunity. I implemented the pieces I thought would work, I adapted pieces I thought needed modification, and I quietly ignored pieces I thought were counterproductive. I knew what my students needed, and I wasn't going to sacrifice that knowledge to some cookie-cutter reform model. That agency—being able to make those professional decisions—that's what kept me going. If I'd felt micromanaged and controlled, I would have burned out. (Interview, January 25, 2023)

Patricia's geographic isolation, typically framed as liability, became resource for resilience by providing space for autonomous decision-making. Her account suggests that teacher resilience depends partly on organizational contexts that afford discretion and trust professional expertise.

The Limits of Strategic Adaptation

However, strategic adaptation had limits. Teachers described situations where organizational surveillance, accountability pressures, or explicit directives constrained their ability to adapt reform meaningfully. Michelle, a ninth-year mathematics teacher, explained:

In my first few years teaching, I had a lot of flexibility. But as we implemented CBE, the district kept adding monitoring—they wanted to see our grade books every week, our competency tracking, our pacing guides. Administrators started doing more frequent observations specifically looking for reform elements. I felt like I couldn't adapt or be creative because I was being watched so closely. Everything had to be done exactly as they said. That surveillance—it shut down my agency, my professional judgment. I was just trying to do what they wanted so I wouldn't get dinged on evaluations. That's when my stress really escalated and I started thinking about leaving. When you can't exercise professional judgment, when everything is prescribed, resilience becomes much harder. (Interview, February 14, 2023)

Michelle's experience illustrates how organizational control systems can undermine resilience by foreclosing the adaptive strategies teachers use to manage reform demands. Her account suggests that resilience requires not just individual capacities but organizational conditions that enable teacher agency.

Theoretical Connections

This theme connects to scholarship on teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015) and adaptive expertise (Hammerness et al., 2005), which emphasize teachers' capacity to make contextualized professional

judgments rather than simply implementing prescribed practices. The strategic adaptation evident in participants' accounts reflects what Gu and Day (2013) term "relative resilience"—the recognition that resilience is not unlimited capacity to endure any circumstance but instead depends on maintaining professional agency and capacity to enact core professional practices.

The theme also reveals tensions between reform implementation fidelity and teacher resilience. While reform designers and administrators often prioritize consistent, standardized implementation, teachers' resilience depends significantly on flexibility to adapt reforms to local contexts and student needs. This finding has important implications for how educational reforms are designed and implemented.

Theme 3: Relational Networks as Lifelines

The third major theme captures the crucial role of collegial relationships in sustaining teacher resilience during reform. Participants overwhelmingly described professional relationships with colleagues as essential for managing reform stress, providing emotional support, enabling practical problem-solving, and creating meaning in collective struggle. These relationships functioned as what many participants termed "lifelines"—essential resources without which they questioned whether they could have persisted.

Emotional Support and Validation

Teachers described needing spaces to express frustration, anxiety, and doubt about reform implementation—emotions they felt unable to share in formal settings with administrators. Trusted colleague relationships provided safe spaces for emotional processing that validated teachers' experiences and reduced isolation.

Sarah described the importance of her grade-level team:

I don't know how I would have survived without my ELA team. We met every week, officially for planning, but honestly half the time we just vented. We'd talk about the absurdities of implementation, the contradictory directives we were getting, the impossible expectations. Just knowing I wasn't alone in feeling overwhelmed—that was huge. We could say to each other, "This is ridiculous," and everyone would nod, and somehow that made it bearable. If I'd been isolated, thinking I was the only one struggling, I think I would have broken. (Interview, December 15, 2022)

Sarah's description highlights how collective venting—often dismissed as mere complaining—actually served important psychological function of validating emotional reactions and reducing isolation. Knowing others shared her experiences normalized her struggle and provided reassurance that difficulties reflected implementation challenges rather than individual inadequacy.

Marcus similarly emphasized his relationship with a veteran colleague:

There's this teacher, James, who's been at my school for 20 years. He's seen every reform come and go. When I was really struggling, feeling like maybe I wasn't cut out for teaching anymore, he told me, "Marcus, you're an excellent teacher. This reform is chaos. That's not on you." That simple statement—hearing it from someone I respected—it kept me from internalizing all the stress as personal failure. He reminded me that I was competent, that the system was broken, not me. That perspective was everything. (Interview, November 3, 2022)

Marcus's experience illustrates how colleague relationships provided alternative narratives that protected teachers' professional self-concepts during difficult periods. Rather than attributing implementation difficulties to personal inadequacy, supportive colleagues helped reframe struggles as systemic issues, maintaining teachers' sense of efficacy.

Practical Problem-Solving and Resource-Sharing

Beyond emotional support, colleague relationships enabled practical collaboration that made implementation more manageable. Teachers described sharing resources, jointly solving problems, dividing labor, and learning from each other's innovations—collaborative strategies that reduced individual workload and enhanced collective capacity.

Jennifer described collaboration with her science department:

CBE required completely redesigning our curriculum into competency-based units. That's an enormous task for one person. But our science department decided to divide it up—each person took a unit, developed it fully with all the competencies and assessments, then shared it with everyone else. So instead of each person doing five units alone, we each did one unit and had five units ready. That collaboration made something that felt impossible become manageable. We also met regularly to troubleshoot—if someone was struggling with how to assess a particular competency, we'd brainstorm together. That shared problem-solving—it made me feel less alone and more capable. (Interview, January 20, 2023)

Jennifer's account demonstrates how strategic collaboration transformed implementation burden from individually overwhelming to collectively manageable. The division of labor and joint problem-solving reflect what Wenger (1998) terms "communities of practice"—groups developing shared knowledge and mutual support around common work.

Diego similarly described informal knowledge exchange with colleagues:

Social studies teachers from across the district created a Google Drive where we shared everything—unit plans, assessments, tracking tools, tips for managing student pacing. Whenever I was stuck on something, I'd check the Drive, and usually someone had already figured it out and shared their solution. That collective intelligence—it was like having a hundred colleagues instead of just the few in my building. I contributed things I figured out, others contributed their innovations, and we all benefited. That resource sharing made implementation so much easier and made me feel connected to a larger community working on the same challenges. (Interview, December 8, 2022)

Diego's description of the shared Google Drive exemplifies how technology enabled networked collaboration that extended beyond traditional school-based collegial relationships. This digital community of practice created distributed expertise accessible to all participants, reducing isolation and enhancing collective capacity.

Collective Meaning-Making

Teachers also described how colleague relationships enabled collective meaning-making—shared interpretation of reform experiences that created coherent narratives from chaotic implementation. Through ongoing dialogue, teachers constructed shared understandings of what the reform meant, how to interpret contradictory directives, and how to maintain professional integrity amid competing demands.

Tamara explained this process:

My special education team would meet and basically do collective sense-making. Administration would tell us one thing, but then we'd get contradictory guidance from the district, and then the state would say something else. Without my team, I would have been completely lost trying to figure out what we were actually supposed to do. But together, we'd compare notes, share what we'd heard, piece together what seemed most consistent, and make group decisions about implementation. We created our own shared understanding because the official communications were so confusing. That collective interpretation—it gave us a coherent framework when everything official was incoherent. (Interview, January 12, 2023)

Tamara's account illustrates how colleague groups functioned as interpretive communities that constructed meaning from fragmented, contradictory information. This collective sense-making provided cognitive coherence that individual teachers might struggle to achieve alone.

Lisa described similar dynamics:

Being in a rural school, we're small—there are only four math teachers in the whole school. That forced us to work closely together. Every week we'd meet and essentially ask, "What does this reform actually mean? What are the core principles? What's negotiable and what's essential?" We developed our own shared philosophy that guided our implementation. When we got directives that conflicted with our philosophy, we'd discuss how to adapt them to align. That shared sense-making—it created stability and consistency in our department even when everything else felt chaotic. (Interview, November 29, 2022)

Lisa's description reveals how colleague groups developed shared professional philosophies that guided implementation decisions. This collective philosophy-building created internal coherence that buffered against external confusion and contradiction.

Navigating Absence of Collegial Support

However, not all teachers experienced supportive collegial relationships. Some participants described colleague relationships characterized by competition, blame, or withdrawal rather than mutual support. These experiences highlight how absence of positive collegial relationships undermined resilience.

Robert described difficult dynamics in his school:

My department was really fractured. People were territorial, competitive. Everyone was so stressed that instead of supporting each other, we were kind of in survival mode—looking out for ourselves. There was blame and finger-pointing—"Well, I'm implementing it correctly" or "I'm not the one causing problems." That toxic environment made everything harder. I ended up withdrawing, just closing my door and dealing with things alone. But that isolation was really difficult. I envied teachers in other schools who described these amazing collaborative cultures. Without that support, resilience required so much more from me individually. (Interview, December 16, 2022)

Robert's experience illustrates how negative collegial dynamics created additional stressors beyond reform itself. Rather than providing support and reducing burden, conflictual relationships intensified stress and isolation, requiring teachers to draw more heavily on individual internal resources.

Aisha described similar isolation as a newer teacher:

As a fifth-year teacher, I wasn't really part of the veteran teacher networks where a lot of the informal support happened. The experienced teachers had their groups, and I felt like an outsider. When I was struggling, I didn't feel comfortable asking for help because I didn't want to look incompetent. So I struggled alone, which was really hard. I think newer teachers are especially vulnerable during reforms

because we don't have those established relationships yet. Building resilience is harder when you're isolated. (Interview, January 8, 2023)

Aisha's account highlights how organizational stratification and insider/outsider dynamics can exclude certain teachers from supportive networks. Her experience as a newer teacher feeling unable to access veteran support systems suggests that relational resilience resources may be inequitably distributed within schools.

Theoretical Connections

This theme strongly connects to social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) and research on teacher communities (Louis & Marks, 1998). The collegial relationships participants described represent bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000)—close, trusting relationships within defined groups that provide emotional support and mutual assistance. The theme also aligns with scholarship on teacher professional communities (Vescio et al., 2008), which demonstrates that schools with strong collaborative cultures show higher teacher satisfaction, commitment, and resilience.

However, this theme also reveals how social capital is unequally distributed and potentially exclusionary. The experiences of teachers like Robert and Aisha, who found themselves outside supportive networks, demonstrate that resilience through relational connection depends on organizational structures and cultures that facilitate rather than impede relationship development. This suggests that building teacher resilience requires attention to organizational conditions enabling positive collegial relationships.

Theme 4: Temporal Perspectives

The fourth major theme captures how teachers' orientations toward time shaped their resilience during reform. Participants described adopting particular temporal perspectives—ways of relating to past, present, and future—that helped them manage reform stress and maintain engagement. These temporal orientations functioned as psychological strategies buffering against the intensity of present challenges.

"This Too Shall Pass": Reform as Temporary

Many teachers sustained resilience by framing reform as temporary phase that would eventually stabilize or fade. Drawing on experience with previous reforms that came and went, veteran teachers adopted "this too shall pass" perspective that normalized present difficulty as transient rather than permanent condition.

David articulated this perspective:

I've been teaching 22 years. I've seen... I don't even know how many reforms. Outcomes-based education, No Child Left Behind, Common Core, project-based learning, now CBE. They all arrive with enormous fanfare, promises to transform education, demands that we change everything immediately. And then, after a few years, either they fade away or they get absorbed into normal practice and lose their urgency. So when CBE came through, I thought, "Okay, this is intense right now, but it won't be this intense forever." That long view—knowing that the current chaos is temporary—it helped me not panic. I could think, "I just need to get through this implementation phase. It will stabilize. Or something else will come along and replace it." That perspective made it manageable. (Interview, February 2, 2023)

David's temporal framing reflects what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) term "iterative agency"—using past experiences to interpret present circumstances and project future possibilities. His history with multiple reforms provided template suggesting current intensity was temporary, which reduced psychological threat and maintained equilibrium.

Patricia expressed similar perspective:

In rural schools, we're somewhat buffered from the latest reforms. Things reach us later, get implemented less intensively, and often fade before they fully take hold. I've learned to think of reforms as weather—sometimes you get storms, but storms don't last forever. You hunker down, you do what you need to survive the storm, and then the sun comes out again. That metaphor helped me during CBE implementation. When things were overwhelming, I'd tell myself, "This is the storm. It's rough right now, but I'll get through it and there will be calmer times ahead." That hope for future stability—it kept me going through present chaos. (Interview, January 25, 2023)

Patricia's weather metaphor exemplifies how temporal framing transformed overwhelming present into manageable temporary disruption. The comparison to storms—intense but finite—provided narrative arc with implied resolution, making current difficulties psychologically tolerable.

Focusing on Immediate, Manageable Present

In contrast to long-term temporal perspectives that minimized present difficulty through comparison with longer trajectories, some teachers sustained resilience by narrowing temporal focus to immediate, manageable present. Rather than worrying about future implementation phases or regretting past practices, these teachers concentrated on getting through one day, one lesson, one challenge at a time.

Marcus described this approach:

Early in implementation, I was so stressed trying to think about everything—all the competencies I needed to develop, all the students I needed to track, all the changes I needed to make. It felt crushing. Then I realized I was trying to do everything at once in my head. I started taking it one day at a time. Each morning I'd think, "What do I need to do today? Just today." I'd make a short list, focus on those things, and not worry about tomorrow's problems. That narrow focus—it made everything feel more manageable. If I thought about the whole reform, it was overwhelming. If I thought about getting through today, that felt possible. (Interview, November 3, 2022)

Marcus's day-by-day approach reflects what psychological research terms "chunking"—breaking overwhelming tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces (Miller, 1956). By narrowing temporal horizon to single days, he reduced cognitive overload and maintained sense of capability.

Michelle described similar strategies:

I'm someone who tends to worry about the future. At the beginning of implementation, I was constantly anxious about whether I'd be able to figure everything out, whether I'd be able to do what they wanted. Then a colleague told me, "Don't borrow tomorrow's problems. Today has enough." That phrase stuck with me. When I'd start worrying about next semester or next year, I'd tell myself, "That's future Michelle's problem. Present Michelle just needs to handle today." That temporal boundary—protecting today from worries about tomorrow—it helped me stay calm and functional. (Interview, February 14, 2023)

Michelle's temporal boundary-setting illustrates how controlling attention allocation across time protected psychological well-being. By refusing to "borrow tomorrow's problems," she contained anxiety within manageable scope.

Maintaining Long-Term Professional Vision

A third temporal orientation involved maintaining long-term professional vision that transcended immediate reform demands. Teachers who sustained resilience often described career trajectories and professional goals extending beyond particular reforms, providing broader temporal context that reduced any single reform's significance.

Kevin explained:

When CBE was at its most chaotic, I reminded myself that this was just one phase of a long career. I'm not teaching for this year or this reform—I'm building a career that will span 30-40 years. This reform is one chapter in that longer story. Keeping that long-term perspective—thinking about the kind of teacher I want to be over decades, not just during this reform—it helped me not get too caught up in present stress. I could think, "This matters, but it doesn't define my entire career. I'm learning things that will serve me long after CBE fades." (Interview, November 18, 2022)

Kevin's long-term career perspective reflects what Holstein and Gubrium (2000) term "biographical work"—individuals' ongoing construction of coherent life narratives. By situating current reform within larger career trajectory, Kevin reduced its definitional power over his professional identity.

Tamara described similar framing:

I have this vision of the kind of special education teacher I want to be—someone who truly advocates for students, who develops their confidence alongside their skills, who makes school a safe place for kids who've often experienced school as trauma. That vision guides me every day. When reform demands conflict with that vision, I adapt the demands to fit my vision, not the other way around. When reform demands align with my vision, I embrace them fully. But my vision—that long-term picture of my professional purpose—that's my North Star. Reforms come and go, but my vision endures. That continuity across time—it provides stability and direction when everything else is changing. (Interview, January 12, 2023)

Tamara's enduring professional vision illustrates how maintaining temporal continuity—connecting past intentions, present practices, and future aspirations—created coherent professional identity that transcended particular reforms. This temporal coherence provided psychological stability amid environmental flux.

When Temporal Perspectives Fail

However, temporal perspectives that sustained some teachers did not work for everyone. Teachers who left during or shortly after reform described temporal framings that intensified rather than buffered stress. One former teacher explained:

Everyone kept saying, "It will get better, just give it time." But as time went on, it didn't get better—it got more entrenched. More systems, more tracking, more compliance demands. I kept waiting for it to improve, to stabilize, and instead it just became the new normal. At some point I realized this wasn't temporary chaos—this was permanent. That was when I knew I couldn't keep going. As long as I thought it was temporary, I could endure it. Once I realized it was the future, indefinitely, I couldn't see myself continuing. (Former participant interview, February 28, 2023)

This account reveals limitations of "this too shall pass" temporal framing. When reforms don't pass but instead become institutionalized, temporal perspectives predicated on transience lose effectiveness. The former teacher's eventual recognition that CBE represented permanent rather than temporary change precipitated her departure, suggesting that certain temporal framings sustain resilience only under specific conditions.

Theoretical Connections

This theme connects to scholarship on temporal orientation and well-being (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) and sociological theories of time (Adam, 1990). The various temporal perspectives teachers adopted—framing reform as temporary, focusing on immediate present, maintaining long-term vision—reflect different strategies for managing psychological time perception in ways that protect well-being during stress.

The theme also relates to research on teacher career trajectories (Huberman, 1989), which documents how teachers' temporal orientations shift across career stages. Veteran teachers' ability to frame reforms as temporary phases reflected accumulated experience across career trajectories, while newer teachers lacked that historical perspective. This suggests that temporal resilience strategies may develop with professional experience.

Theme 5: Identity Reconstruction

The final major theme captures how sustaining resilience required teachers to reconstruct their professional identities as reform demands fundamentally changed what teaching meant. Rather than simply enduring external change while maintaining stable internal sense of professional self, resilient teachers actively renegotiated who they were as teachers, what teaching meant to them, and how they understood their professional roles. This identity work—sometimes painful, often profound—enabled teachers to create coherent professional identities within transformed contexts.

Letting Go of Previous Professional Identities

Many teachers described needing to relinquish aspects of professional identity they valued but that no longer fit reform expectations. This letting go involved grief and loss but proved necessary for constructing viable identities within new contexts.

Lisa articulated this process:

I defined myself as a really good teacher because I was excellent at delivering lessons—I could explain complex math concepts clearly, use multiple representations, engage students through lectures and demonstrations. That's who I was—an expert explainer, a dynamic lecturer. Then CBE came along and suddenly the model was student-paced, student-driven. My role wasn't to deliver instruction but to facilitate students' self-directed learning. At first I resisted—I thought, "But I'm good at teaching! Why are they taking that away from me?" I felt like they were taking my identity. Eventually I realized I could either cling to that old identity and be miserable, or I could let it go and build a new one. Letting go was hard—it felt like mourning. But it was necessary for moving forward. (Interview, November 29, 2022)

Lisa's account illustrates how identity reconstruction required grieving previous professional selves. The phrase "it felt like mourning" captures the emotional weight of releasing identity components that had been central to professional self-concept. Her willingness to relinquish her lecturer identity, despite its difficulty, enabled her to ultimately construct new identity aligned with reform expectations.

Robert described similar identity renegotiation:

I prided myself on being the expert in my classroom—the person with the knowledge that students needed to learn. My authority came from my expertise. Then collaborative learning and student-driven inquiry became the norm, and suddenly my expertise felt less central. Students were supposed to construct their own knowledge, drive their own inquiries. I had to figure out what my role was if I wasn't the expert authority. That identity crisis—"If I'm not the expert, who am I?"—that was really challenging. I had to reconstruct my identity around being a facilitator, a guide, a resource, rather than the source of knowledge. That required really fundamentally rethinking what it means to be a teacher. (Interview, December 16, 2022)

Robert's "identity crisis" language reveals the profound destabilization that occurred when reform challenged core identity components. His reconstruction from "expert authority" to "facilitator and guide" represents fundamental identity transformation rather than minor adjustment, demonstrating the depth of identity work resilience sometimes required.

Integrating New Identity Elements

Beyond letting go, identity reconstruction involved integrating new identity elements that aligned with reform expectations while feeling authentic to individual teachers. Teachers described experimenting with new roles, gradually incorporating them into professional identities, and ultimately experiencing them as genuine rather than imposed.

Aisha described her identity evolution:

Before CBE, I saw myself mainly as a content teacher—someone who taught literature and writing skills. But competency-based education required tracking individual students' progress, providing personalized feedback, adjusting instruction based on where each student was. I had to develop a stronger identity as a student advocate and individualized instructor. At first that felt awkward—like I was playing a role. But as I got better at it, as I saw how much students benefited from that personal attention, it became part of who I am. Now I can't imagine teaching any other way. My identity expanded to include dimensions I hadn't valued before. (Interview, January 8, 2023)

Aisha's narrative of identity expansion—from "content teacher" to "student advocate and individualized instructor"—illustrates how identity reconstruction could feel additive rather than purely subtractive. Rather than only losing previous identity, she gained new identity dimensions that enhanced her professional self-concept. The evolution from "awkward" to "part of who I am" demonstrates how identity changes that initially feel inauthentic can become genuine through repeated enactment.

Kevin similarly described integrating technology-oriented identity:

I was always somewhat technophobic—I used technology when necessary but it wasn't central to my teaching identity. CBE required much more technology use for tracking competencies, providing digital feedback, enabling student-paced learning through online resources. I had to develop competence and comfort with educational technology. As I got better at it, I started seeing myself differently—not as a technophobe but as someone who could leverage technology effectively. That identity shift opened up new possibilities in my teaching. Now I'm the person colleagues come to for tech advice. That would have been unimaginable five years ago. My professional identity transformed in ways I never anticipated, and ultimately that enriched rather than diminished who I am. (Interview, November 18, 2022)

Kevin's transformation from "technophobe" to technology resource person exemplifies how identity reconstruction can lead to unexpected professional growth. His recognition that identity transformation "enriched rather than diminished" him suggests that identity reconstruction, while challenging, can produce positive outcomes.

Maintaining Identity Continuity Amid Change

Importantly, identity reconstruction did not mean abandoning all previous identity components. Resilient teachers described maintaining core identity elements that provided continuity across reform while adapting more peripheral identity dimensions.

Sarah explained this selective continuity:

There are some things about who I am as a teacher that didn't change with CBE and won't change with any future reform. I'm someone who cares deeply about students as whole people, not just learners. I'm someone who believes literature has power to change lives and help young people understand themselves and their world. Those core identity commitments—they remained constant even as lots of other things changed. The specific methods I use change, the structures of my classroom change, but my fundamental identity as someone who uses literature to support adolescents' development—that endures. Maintaining that continuity, knowing there's a core that doesn't change with every reform, that provides stability. (Interview, December 15, 2022)

Sarah's distinction between "core identity commitments" and changeable "methods" and "structures" reveals how teachers differentiated essential from peripheral identity dimensions. By protecting core while adapting periphery, she maintained identity coherence across change.

Jennifer similarly described identity continuity:

I'm a science teacher, and at the deepest level, what that means is I want students to understand how the natural world works and to think scientifically. That core purpose—it didn't change with CBE. What changed was how I help students develop scientific understanding. Before, I might have used more direct instruction. Now I use more inquiry-based approaches. But the fundamental goal, my core identity as someone developing scientific thinkers—that remains constant. That continuity gives me an anchor when everything else is shifting. (Interview, January 20, 2023)

Jennifer's anchor metaphor captures how identity continuity stabilized teachers amid environmental turbulence. By maintaining core identity commitments—"developing scientific thinkers"—while adapting implementation approaches, she experienced change as evolution rather than complete transformation.

Identity Reconstruction Failures

However, not all teachers successfully reconstructed professional identities aligned with reform expectations. For some, the gulf between previous identities and reform-demanded identities proved too wide, leading to identity impasse that precipitated departure.

A former teacher described this experience:

I became a teacher because I loved my content and wanted to share that love with students. I saw myself as a subject matter expert who inspired students to love literature the way I do. CBE required me to become something different—a competency tracker, a data manager, a facilitator of individualized learning. Those roles just didn't resonate with who I am or why I went into teaching. I tried to make it

work, I really did. But at some point I realized I couldn't construct a professional identity within CBE that felt authentic to me. I couldn't be who the reform wanted me to be without giving up too much of who I actually am. That incompatibility—it's why I left. I wasn't willing to give up my identity to keep my job. (Former participant interview, February 28, 2023)

This account illustrates limitations of identity reconstruction as resilience strategy. When reform demands required identity transformations that felt inauthentic or violated deeply held values, reconstruction proved impossible. The teacher's unwillingness to "give up identity to keep job" reflects prioritization of identity integrity over employment, demonstrating that resilience has limits tied to identity authenticity.

Theoretical Connections

This theme strongly connects to identity theory (Beijaard et al., 2004) and research on teacher identity formation (Flores & Day, 2006). The identity reconstruction teachers described aligns with theories proposing that professional identity is not fixed but continually reconstructed through interaction between individual biography and social contexts (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

The theme also relates to Ibarra's (1999) research on identity adaptation during career transitions, which documents how individuals experiment with "provisional selves"—possible identities they try out and gradually integrate or reject based on feedback and authenticity assessments. The gradual identity evolution teachers described—from awkward experimentation to authentic integration—mirrors Ibarra's model of adaptive identity work.

However, the theme also reveals that identity reconstruction has limits. When reforms demand identity transformations violating core professional values or requiring abandonment of central identity commitments, reconstruction may not be possible without fundamental compromise of identity integrity. This suggests that teacher resilience depends partly on organizational changes being compatible with core professional identity commitments.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented five major themes capturing middle school teachers' experiences of resilience during large-scale educational reform. The themes reveal resilience as complex, multidimensional phenomenon requiring psychological strategies (anchoring to purpose, temporal framing), agentic practices (strategic adaptation), relational resources (collegial networks), and identity work (professional reconstruction). Several key findings emerge:

First, resilience is not simply individual psychological trait but instead reflects dynamic interaction between individual capacities, relational resources, organizational conditions, and the nature of change itself. Teachers sustained resilience through multiple, interconnected strategies rather than single approaches.

Second, resilience has limits. When reforms prevented teachers from enacting core professional purposes, foreclosed professional agency, lacked collegial support, or demanded identity transformations teachers experienced as inauthentic, resilience strategies proved insufficient. Understanding what supports resilience requires equal attention to what undermines it.

Third, resilience is not morally neutral. Strategic adaptation sometimes required selective non-compliance with reform mandates based on professional judgment. The study reveals tensions between

administrative desires for implementation fidelity and teacher practices sustaining resilience through adaptation and boundary-setting.

Fourth, resilience reflects privilege and positionality. Veterans' temporal perspectives drew on historical experience newer teachers lacked. Teachers in supportive collegial networks had resilience resources unavailable to isolated teachers. These differential resources suggest resilience is inequitably distributed.

Finally, the findings suggest that teacher resilience during reform depends critically on organizational conditions—opportunities for agency, supportive collegial cultures, protection of core professional practices—not simply individual psychological capacities. This has important implications for how educational reforms are designed and implemented.

Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in relation to existing theory and research, examine implications for practice and policy, acknowledge study limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

Word Count: 7,521 words

[Note: In a full thesis, this chapter would continue with additional analysis, potentially reaching 8,000-9,000 words with more extensive data presentation and deeper theoretical engagement. The chapter would also include more figures/tables presenting demographic data, theme relationships, and analytical frameworks.]

References

[References would include 45+ sources cited throughout the full thesis. Sample references for concepts mentioned in this chapter:]

Adam, B. (1990). *Time and social theory*. Polity Press.

Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(2), 107-128.

Coldron, J., & Smith, R. (1999). Active location in teachers' construction of their professional identities. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(6), 711-726.

Day, C., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington, A., & Gu, Q. (2007). *Teachers matter: Connecting work, lives and effectiveness*. Open University Press.

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023.

Flores, M. A., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(2), 219-232.

Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2013). Challenges to teacher resilience: Conditions count. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 22-44.

Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., Bransford, J., Berliner, D., Cochran-Smith, M., McDonald, M., & Zeichner, K. (2005). How teachers learn and develop. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world* (pp. 358-389). Jossey-Bass.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *The self we live by: Narrative identity in a postmodern world*. Oxford University Press.

Huberman, M. (1989). The professional life cycle of teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 91(1), 31-57.

Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 764-791.

Louis, K. S., & Marks, H. M. (1998). Does professional community affect the classroom? Teachers' work and student experiences in restructuring schools. *American Journal of Education*, 106(4), 532-575.

Miller, G. A. (1956). The magical number seven, plus or minus two: Some limits on our capacity for processing information. *Psychological Review*, 63(2), 81-97.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.

Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1), 80-91.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Zimbardo, P. G., & Boyd, J. N. (1999). Putting time in perspective: A valid, reliable individual-differences metric. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(6), 1271-1288.