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"Seeking Resilience, Sustaining Development": A Self-Narrative Study of Early Career English Teacher Resilience from an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: Teacher resilience has been an increasingly hot topic in the booming perspective of positive psychology. It has often been conceptualized as the capacity to bounce back from teaching adversities that form in the process of dynamic and complex interaction and interconnection between teachers and the context in which they operate. However, scant attention has been paid to unveiling the fluctuation and process developmental mechanism of early career English teacher resilience, especially from an ecological perspective. A self-narrative study could serve as a bridge to understand teachers' capacity for resilience to navigate multiple challenges, discover and reconstruct themselves and ensure recovery and development in their daily interaction with their environment. Against this backdrop, the present study adopted a self-narrative method to explore the dynamic development and influencing factors of early career English teacher resilience. Results concerning early career English teacher resilience displayed an approximate V-shaped developmental trajectory evincing a Fighting–Lying flat–Seeking balance–Fighting–Fighting transition during the early stages of an educational career. Additionally, this was affected by various personal factors (i.e., previous experience, belief, motivation and well-being) and contextual factors (i.e., students, family and colleagues) over the past five years. In light of these findings, implications are proposed for fostering early career teachers' resilience to deal with setbacks and promoting their sustainable professional development.

Keywords: early career English teacher resilience; dynamic changes; self-narrative study; ecological perspective

1. Introduction

Language teacher psychology has been under constant investigation for its catalytic role in coping with the professional challenges of teacher education's continuous reform and development [1–4]. In addition to being exposed to the same heavy workloads and pressure to address student misbehavior that all elementary and middle school teachers suffer [5], English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in universities, especially those at an early stage of their career, face stress and challenges in living up to high social expectations, obtaining a doctoral degree, applying for and completing projects related to foreign language education and cultivating students' ability to spread the excellent Chinese culture in English [6]. As a critical factor of positive psychology, resilience plays a constructive role in maintaining university teachers' professional enthusiasm, commitment and inexhaustible motivation to keep working in the face of these pressures and challenges. Extant studies have argued that early career teacher resilience is dynamic and interconnected with the environment in which teachers live [7–9]. They have focused on the protective or risk factors relating to teachers' capacity for resilience by comparing early career teacher resilience with that of teachers at other career stages using typologies [10]. However, few studies have

examined the resilient features of early career university English teachers, especially their in-depth emotions and actions toward forming resilience in the process of interacting with their context. Additionally, with the ecological turn in teacher education and development, Bronfenbrenner, the founder of the ecology of human development, proposed an ecological systems theory/model [11–13], providing an essential framework for exploring the development of teachers' resilience in their interrelationships with different nested layers of the ecological systems in which they live [14]. However, two dimensions have received less attention. First, how does individual early career university English teacher resilience emerge and develop during interactions with ecological systems? Second, what factors influence the development of teacher resilience in their early careers? In other words, "we must further explore how we, as teacher educators, view ourselves as change agents in teacher education" [15] (p. 147). To comprehend the intricate experiences and emotions of an individual university English teacher in a dynamic and evolving context that shapes resilience, this study employed a self-narrative approach and an ecological perspective to delve into the intricate fluctuations in and development of the resilience of an early career university English teacher (the first author) with five years of teaching experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining English Teacher Resilience

To date, there is no consensus among education researchers on the definition of teacher resilience—a controversial point that has been widely discussed in previous theoretical and empirical studies. Teacher resilience has often been regarded as a quality/capacity or trait that could help teachers recover from adversities and harrowing events [7,16]. However, some scholars have pointed out that teacher resilience is an ever-evolving dynamic interaction with the surrounding environment [17,18]. In fact, as "process orientation and ability/capacity orientation are not contradictory" [3] (p. 2), teacher resilience can be more accurately conceptualized as the capacity or trait to cope effectively with the challenges of teaching and life within the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment [3,10]. In particular, teacher resilience is an ability that develops over time during teachers' constant interaction, interdependence and interconnection with their surroundings as they acquire personal and contextual sustenance, capitalizing on the positive factors and counteracting the negative ones. This capacity, in turn, facilitates the teacher's interaction with surrounding factors as they continually develop. Therefore, inspired by previous studies [3,7,10], the early career English teacher resilience in this study was defined as the capacity to help the teacher bounce back from adversities, emerge from interactions with their surroundings, and thrive in their sustainable professional development.

2.2. Unveiling the Profile of Teacher Resilience

According to the majority of previous research, teacher resilience is developed through a complex and dynamic interactive process involving personal and contextual factors across various phases of the teacher's professional life [10,18–20]. Day and Gu [19] divided teachers' work and lives into "six professional life phases: 0–3, 4–7, 8–15, 16–23, 24–30 and 31+ years of teaching" (p. 433) to capture the various factors affecting teacher commitment, resilience and effectiveness at each stage of the teaching career. Their results showed that the factors with critical roles in shaping teacher resilience and sustaining teachers' commitment and effectiveness during the early, mid-career and final stages of their professional life trajectory were situated factors, the combined impact of positive professional and situated factors and in-school support, respectively. However, empirical works have tended to compare early-career teachers as a group to mid-career and late-career teachers using typological methods to explore the specific features and most salient influencing factors of teacher resilience at different teaching phases [10]. This demands further attention to spotlight individual teachers and explore changes in their specific traits of resilience in depth in early career teaching to provide a comprehensive description and analysis for concreteness rather than generality [21].

Substantial evidence supports that positive factors or resources foster early career teacher resilience to ensure retention in the profession [8,9]. Several positive factors contribute to the emergence of teacher resilience and facilitate the mobilization of resources around teachers, including personal protective factors, such as motivation, optimism and good work–life balance [22], and contextual factors, such as the teacher–student and teacher–leader relationships and family [8]. The factors that hinder the development of teacher resilience are personal risk factors, such as the conflict between belief and practice [10] and burnout [22], and contextual factors, such as heavy workload [23] and lack of support [22,24]. However, there is ambiguity due to the limited studies on the changes in these influencing factors across the career trajectories of individual teachers. Existing research has rarely addressed whether these factors are present at different developmental stages of individual teachers and whether these factors always act as protective or risk factors. Therefore, it was imperative to conduct comprehensive research on an individual early career teacher by dividing the early career phase into more nuanced stages and exploring the dynamic trajectory of teacher resilience during these stages, identifying the influencing factors and capturing the potential of the risk factors transforming into positive ones. This self-narrative study addressed two research questions: How did the capacity for resilience evolve during the past five years, when the first author worked as a university English teacher, and what factors influenced this change and development during the early stage of her career?

3. The Analytical Framework

The study's analytical framework was based on a combination of the continuum of resilience model [25] and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory/model [12,13] since they suited our aim to explore the continuous and dynamic change in early career English teacher resilience and its influencing factors in different ecological systems.

A framework embedded throughout this paper is Hunter and Chandler's continuum of resilience model [25]. The model was selected for its advantage in conceptualizing resilience as "a continuum that varies with each developmental stage and can be expressed in behaviors at each stage that may be interpreted as positive or negative" [25] (p. 244). According to Hunter and Chandler [25], an individual's modifying factors of resilience, including internal and external protective factors, developed competencies and developmental stages, come into play when they experience stress or trauma. These factors aid the individual in bouncing back from challenging situations. Under the influence of modifying resilience factors, individual resilience presents three levels of survival—namely, survival, defensive and healthy tactics. Survival tactics mean that individuals protect themselves through "violence, high risk behaviors, social and emotional withdrawal"; defensive tactics refer to the strategies of "disconnection, insulation, isolation, self-reliant, not trusting"; and healthy tactics include "flexibility, adaptive, distancing, self-esteem, self-efficacy, competence, trust, connecting, sociability" [25] (p. 246). The ecological perspective paved an important theoretical path for examining the model's internal and external protective factors, developed competencies and developmental stages to help us understand the dynamic process and influential aspects of teacher resilience.

Another framework adopted for this study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory/model [12,13]. Studies from an ecological perspective focus on the interaction and interplay relationship between individuals and their surrounding contexts, emphasizing that individuals, as persons with unique thoughts, feelings and goals, are part of their context and also change and develop under the influence of their context, acting in turn on the context. In recent years, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory/model, as a representative ecological theory, has been widely applied in research on language teacher psychology, such as anxiety [26], buoyancy [5] and resilience [14]. Bronfenbrenner [12,13] viewed individuals as developing persons in the nested ecological systems model, comprising the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Specifically, the microsystem includes the pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations that shape individuals'

developmental experiences within a particular face-to-face setting with specific physical, social and symbolic characteristics [13]. In this study, the elements in English teachers' immediate settings, where they interacted and developed connections with others, were situated in the microsystem, such as family, colleagues and leaders. The mesosystem, often viewed as a relational system, focuses on the linkages and processes taking place between two or more micro situations in which the person is actively involved, such as the influences of the teacher–family and leader–student interactions on English teachers. The exosystem refers to the linkages and processes between two or more situations that indirectly involve the developing person but in which events occur that impact the person's situation. In this study, school requirements and job promotions were situated in this system, as in the previous survey [27]. The macrosystem is regarded as a societal blueprint within a particular culture, subculture and broader social context, such as national policies or the institutional expectations of university teachers. The chronosystem is concerned with changes in individuals and their surroundings resulting from significant life events or experiences. This study focused on changes in teacher resilience during the first five years of teaching with the occurrence of critical incidents. However, the model devoted too much attention to the surrounding environment and not enough to the people themselves [28]. Mansfield et al. [14] expanded the personal system into the ecological systems model, including personal risks (i.e., difficulty in asking for help) and resources of teacher resilience (i.e., motivation and efficacy, a sense of moral purpose and vocation, hope and high expectations). As integral components of the teacher ecology, individual teachers play a pivotal role in promoting the dynamic development of teacher resilience through their unique characteristics, emotions, aspirations and experiences as they interact with their surrounding environment. Inspired by Hunter and Chandler's [25] continuum of resilience model, as well as Bronfenbrenner's [12,13] and Mansfield's [14] ecological systems model, we attempted to create an analytical framework to capture the complex and dynamic development of early career English teacher resilience (see Figure 1).
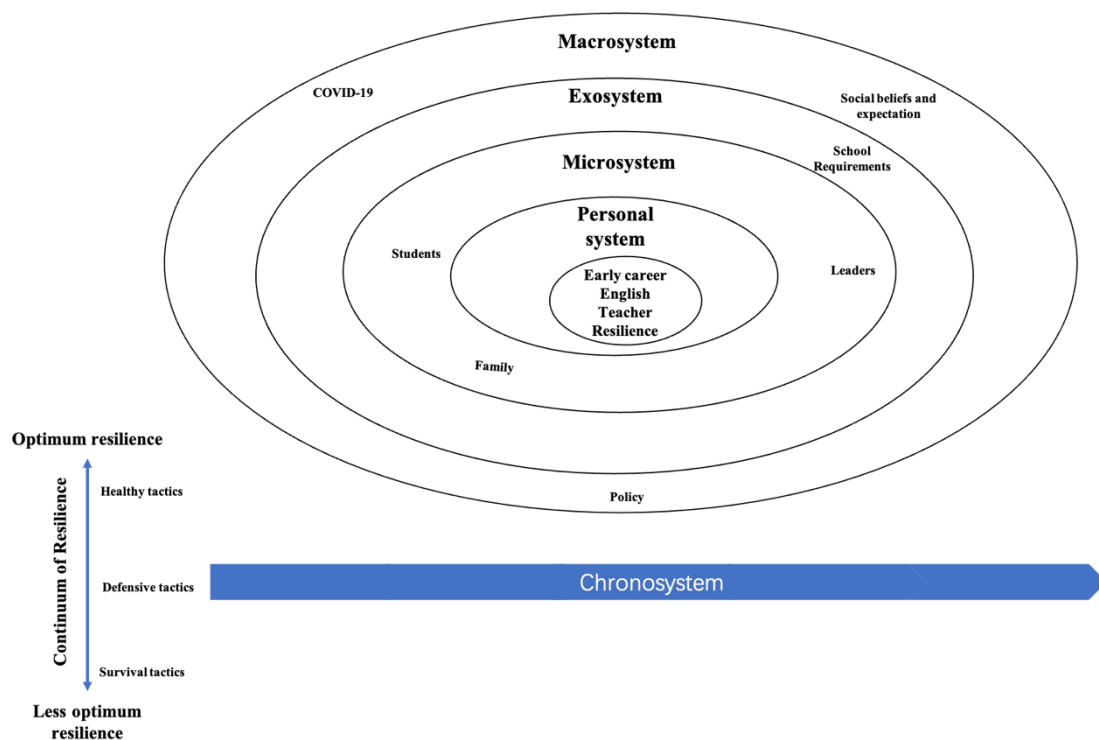

Figure 1. Analytical framework: Nested ecological systems for early career English teacher resilience.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Context and Self-Narrative Study

The first author of this paper was an English teacher from a private university possessing five years of teaching experience. Private universities in China have experienced significant development in recent years, with an increasing number of undergraduate students enrolling (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1101551/china-number-of-undergraduate-students-at-private-universities/, accessed on 1 June 2023), owing to their continuous pursuit of progress and support from local governments [29]. Although public universities have been proven to play a crucial role in facilitating educational reform, stimulating educational vitality [29] and promoting sustainable development [30], they still differ substantially from public universities in teaching level [31], academic research [32] and student cultivation [33,34]. These differences place significant demands on teachers in private universities. In this context, early career teachers are burdened with significant academic research responsibilities and teaching workload due to the hiring of professors at advanced ages at public universities and middle-aged teachers' time constraints [32]. Insufficient funding, a heavy workload, a shortage of learning opportunities, and inadequate library and online resources fail to provide sufficient external support for early career teachers at private universities. In addition to these external resource shortages, they face psychological, emotional and professional pressures. Early career teachers, also referred to as student teachers or beginning in-service teachers in Fuller's [35] study, are primarily concerned with themselves, especially the "problems relating to self-adequacy (discipline, budgeting time . . . motivation, knowledge of resources, knowing how to use equipment etc.)" (p. 215).

Faced with such immense pressure, some early career teachers resign from their positions at private universities, while others persevere; some choose to strive for professional development, while others resort to "lying flat"—a state of ceasing all efforts under overwhelming stress. All of these outcomes are the result of varying levels of resilient performance. The first author of this paper has been an exemplary early career teacher at private universities who has faced similar challenging teaching experiences. However, her experience possessed a distinctive character. By effectively utilizing both personal and contextual resources to foster resilience and promote career development in teaching, she not only garnered positive student evaluations and published high-level journal articles but also successfully secured the opportunity to pursue a PhD, creating opportunities for sustainable career growth. Therefore, to investigate the development of teachers and sustainable development, it was imperative to explore how this teacher's resilience evolved and what factors influenced this evolution.

Self-study, as "the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas" [36] (p. 265), has been recommended by scholars across a broad spectrum of teacher education disciplines [37, 38]. With a thorough analysis of the working and living conditions of teacher education, this approach has concentrated on the development of pedagogical knowledge in the context of teaching and its related concerns [39], particularly for the outcomes of teaching practice in its dynamic and complex setting [40], with real and valid data. As Vanassche and Kelchtermans [41] pinpointed, "validation in self-study is based on trustworthiness" (p. 517), which can be observed and interpreted through collaboration with team members (also as teacher education researchers). In prospecting the first author's teacher resilience, the second and third authors, as well-known education researchers and her well-trusted team members, played the crucial roles of stimulating her reflection and testing other supporting data, such as awards and student evaluations, to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Narrative inquiry centers on social and contextual factors, serving as an integral approach for both pre-service and in-service teachers to understand the teaching profession and the dynamic changes in teacher psychology [42] for self-investigation. Narrative inquiry can be used to deeply explore various pressures teachers face and factors promoting the development of teacher resilience through individual narratives [43]. Therefore, this paper presents a self-narrative study conducted to investigate the resilience of an early

career English teacher (the first author), which not only identified the salient and typical resilient features between herself and other university EFL teachers but also explored the complexity and dynamic characteristics of resilience shaped in the interaction with the surrounding environment through her own narrative.

4.2. Data Collection

The primary data source for this study consisted of narrative accounts derived from the first author's teaching experience, which were provided voluntarily and with assurance of their authenticity. These stories offer personal insights into the first author's inner voice, allowing us to better understand her emotions, actions and resilience. Data from the self-study of teaching and teacher education practices must be obtained from personal and external perspectives [44] to ensure data validity. Therefore, besides the self-narrative stories of the first author, the awards granted to the first author and student feedback and evaluations were collected as sources to observe the outcomes of her resilience in her professional development and her students. Student feedback and evaluations on her were collected to assess students' increased motivation and changes in learning attitudes and to obtain their feedback on the first author's resilience and teaching performance. Data collection consisted of two stages. The first stage commenced with the composition of self-narratives, including reflections on challenges, coping strategies, work achievement and influencing factors during the first author's pre-service and early career stages. To ensure the diversity and authenticity of the data and self-narratives, we collected the data relating to awards received by the first author and feedback and evaluations provided by her students during stage two.

4.3. Data Analysis

Critical incidents analysis [45,46] is a pivotal qualitative research method that facilitates in-depth comprehension of teachers' transformative moments or modifications in their pedagogical practices. The data analysis process comprised three distinct stages. First, the first author identified her own critical incidents, especially the turning points that significantly impacted her resilience, shaping and developing as nodes to categorize the challenges encountered at each stage, corresponding countermeasures and changes in her mindset. The second and third authors cross-checked the division of stages in the self-narratives and the other supporting data to ensure authenticity and reliability from an ethical perspective. Following the analytical process described above, the first author's narrative story was segmented into six distinct stages (see Section 5). Second, in response to the first research question, we utilized the continuum of the resilience model [25] to categorize the level of resilience exhibited by the first author based on her emotional responses and coping strategies when facing setbacks and challenges. Third, we identified the factors that influenced the first author's resilience capacity and categorized them into different ecological systems according to Bronfenbrenner's [12,13] and Mansfield's [14] ecological systems models to address the second research question. In the second and third processes of the analysis, the three authors independently coded the data and cross-checked them to guarantee the reliability of the study. In the findings section, the narratives are presented in the first person, as the author of these narratives is the first author.

5. Findings

As an early career teacher with one-and-a-half years of internship experience and five years of teaching experience, joining the teaching profession, getting married, being pregnant, facing the emergence of COVID-19, pursuing a PhD in 2020 and publishing my first high-level paper were essential turning points in my teaching career, where my internal and external contexts were transformed and my resilience emerged and developed. To clarify the understanding of early career English teacher resilience at different stages, I divided my narratives, covering both my pre-service stage and the first five years of

teaching, into six stories based on the turning points of critical incidents. The division of stages has been examined and agreed upon by the second and third authors.

5.1. Story 1: A Frustrated but Determined Period: From a Student Teacher to an Early Career Teacher

It was always my dream to become a university teacher because it would offer the flexibility of not being confined to campus all the time, provide ample opportunities for further academic pursuits, facilitate communication with renowned scholars both domestically and internationally and enable participation in the Visiting Scholar Program. My most salient aspect lay in the achievement and enjoyment I derived from engaging with students. I was confident and steadfast in my belief due to my year and a half of experience as a student teacher at two private universities before obtaining my master's degree, which helped me accumulate teaching skills and develop a strong understanding of how to maintain a harmonious relationship with students. The discrepancy between my belief and reality inevitably resulted in anxiety, disappointment, frustration and hopelessness, particularly regarding the incompatibility of my master's degree with the recruitment policies of universities. With graduation approaching, while my classmates secured jobs as English teachers in elementary, middle and high schools or written or spoken English translators, I was still searching for my dream job. After consulting with several teachers and my family, I gradually realized that I could choose to work at a private university that mandated a master's degree as an educational requirement. However, I would not have the salary and benefits or opportunities for further study and participation in the Visiting Scholar Program that public universities offer. With outstanding academic performance during my master's program and valuable internship experience, I successfully embarked on a career as an English teacher at a private university. Meanwhile, I quietly nurtured a seed of aspiration to pursue a PhD in my heart.

5.2. Story 2: A Challenging but Enthusiastic Period: From Obtaining My Master's Degree to Getting Married

During my first year of teaching, one of the challenges I encountered was the stress associated with participating in a teaching contest. Coinciding with the critical period for my university to enhance its teaching quality, I, as a novice teacher, was expected to participate in internal and external teaching contests, which were considered crucial means of evaluating teachers' teaching quality. Attaching great importance to them, the leaders devised multiple strategies to facilitate novice teachers' rapid adaptation to the teaching environment and enhance their pedagogical proficiency. These included implementing a "mentor–novice teacher cooperation" model and organizing trial-teaching-evaluating-revising-trial-teaching patterns. I experienced significant pressure throughout the process, often modifying lecture content until midnight. Despite this, I maintained a strong passion for teaching due to my previous experience, positive attitude towards competition, my students' active cooperation and assistance, and the encouragement, appreciation and support from leaders, colleagues and mentors. With the proactive initiative, constant reflection based on feedback from leaders, colleagues and mentors, and continuous revision of my teaching content and skills, I eventually got second place in the contest.

Another source of pressure that left me feeling confused and exhausted was academic research. I was brought in to initiate research projects, which was a weakness compared to my proficiency in teaching practice. Completing a high-quality project application within a short timeframe, without sufficient time to systematically review the relevant literature, proved challenging. Despite my concerted efforts, I could only successfully apply for a school-level teaching and research project. However, I persevered in pursuing academic research and remained committed to achieving breakthroughs despite the challenges. I sought guidance from leaders and mentors, consulted relevant papers and online courses and continued to read literature during my spare time while preparing for my wedding with the help of my family.

5.3. Story 3: A Period of Resolve but Elusion: From Pregnancy to the End of Maternity Leave

I was diagnosed with threatened abortion in the early stage of pregnancy, causing concern for my health and my unborn child. Nevertheless, after only a two-week break, I persisted in teaching and completing my workload until 38 weeks and five days into my pregnancy. I could consistently attend classes due to the harmonious teacher–student relationship and my passion for teaching. The active participation of students during the course, their support outside of class and the effective communication between us fostered my resilience to be more responsible and improve my well-being. As I endeavored to build an image of a resilient teacher through perseverance and effort, I aimed to inspire my students to become more resilient and strive for their desired positions as well. After a year of exploring ways to improve my academic research ability, I successfully applied to a provincial higher education association and published a paper while pregnant. Although I was proud of my pre-service and efforts, I chose to "lie flat" due to my shattered belief in myself as a good teacher owing to my inability to integrate into the new environment. My inability to attend college meetings and communicate effectively with new leaders and colleagues was due to regular pregnancy examinations that coincided with these events. During that time, the university also encouraged teachers to participate in the collaborative PhD program. However, I could not do so due to my lack of qualifications and pregnancy. Consequently, I ceased actively communicating with my leaders and colleagues and refrained from applying for other projects.

5.4. Story 4: A Period of Anxiety but Confidence: From the Outbreak of COVID-19 to the First PhD Application in 2020

The end of my maternity leave coincided with the global outbreak of COVID-19. Following the national educational policy of "classes suspended but learning continues" during the spring semester of 2020, teachers were required to conduct online teaching, which not only caused me anxiety but also served as a significant turning point in my career where I could fortify and reconstruct my beliefs.

I experienced anxiety while teaching online due to insufficient technological pedagogical and content knowledge, which hindered my ability to create adequate network teaching resources and utilize various online platforms. Fortunately, I maintained a harmonious relationship with my students. Moreover, during this period of anxiety, I discovered that I had more leisure time at my disposal. In these moments, I began to reflect on my career aspirations and original dream of becoming an English teacher at a university. Therefore, I resolved to redouble my efforts towards applying for a PhD to realize this ambition. With the assistance of my family, I reasonably planned and diligently adhered to a few hours of daily study time following my infant's schedule and work commitments. In May 2020, I applied for a PhD program for the first time. Although I was not accepted initially, I remained confident in my abilities and firmly committed to pursuing a doctoral degree.

5.5. Story 5: A Multitasking but Fulfilling Period: From Joining the Team to Successfully Publishing the First High-Level Paper

In juggling multiple roles as a university English teacher, novice mother, PhD applicant and professor's scientific research team member, I encountered several challenges in undergoing the transition from online to offline teaching as the city rebounds from COVID-19.

I was fortunate to join Professor X's team in July 2020, which greatly enhanced my academic research ability. I struggled to complete the team task due to the limited studying time and excess workload at the university. I vividly recall my one-year-old child standing outside the study room, knocking on the door and crying for Mommy. Despite encountering numerous challenges, I appreciated the significant individuals who crossed my path and valuable experiences during this period. Professor X, a distinguished scholar and exceptional educator, instilled in me the belief that I must diligently fulfill every task

regardless of the obstacles I face. In addition, the students actively participated in classroom activities and provided me with positive feedback that encouraged me to improve.

In addition, my family was fully supportive of me as they had been in previous years. The experience of attending the Global Teacher Education Summit, where I had the opportunity to learn from distinguished domestic and international scholars, further stimulated my academic pursuits. My continuous personal efforts and support from others culminated in a high-level (Social Sciences Citation Index [SSCI]) book review, an industry–university cooperation project sponsored by the Ministry of Education and recognition through an "advanced worker" award at the university level.

5.6. Story 6: A Stressful but Rewarding Period: From the First High-Level Paper Publication to the Successful PhD Application in 2022

In the first half of 2022, I reapplied to the PhD program and successfully passed in preparation for the interview. However, due to another outbreak of COVID-19 in my province, offline classes were abruptly shifted online after only one week. University supervisors and leaders consistently inspected the online classrooms. My teaching and evaluation methods received excellent reviews for their contributions to strengthening students' creative and critical thinking. Therefore, I was tasked with preparing additional public lessons, which inevitably exerted tremendous pressure on me. In addition, the leaders hoped that I could apply for a provincial social science academic project. They suggested numerous revisions for my project application due to the publication of my previous high-level book review. The pressures of preparing for my imminent PhD examination, conducting intense academic research and delivering continuous public lessons stretched beyond my capacity and left me exhausted and overwhelmed. Although the period was stressful for me, I benefited from saving time on commuting and having no life worries. While my family stocked up on living essentials, I enjoyed the peace of mind while studying, alleviating the frustration of being isolated at home and the immense pressure of my workload and studies. Fortunately, I was admitted to this university in July 2022. At this point, my career plan and life aspirations came to fruition and marked the commencement of the next phase.

6. Discussion

6.1. The V-Shaped Developmental Trajectory of Early Career English Teacher Resilience

This study revealed a dynamic developmental process of English teacher resilience that fluctuated over time. With turning points of critical incidents in the first author's career as an early career teacher with five years of teaching experience, her resilience presented the dynamic developmental trajectory with the changes in individual stages (besides her physical state), surrounding context and time.

6.1.1. Pre-Service Stage: The Realization of a Dream Amidst a Conflict between Belief and Practice

The experiences and teaching beliefs during the pre-service stage contributed significantly to fostering early career teacher resilience [47], especially when the first author confronted a conflict between beliefs and practice [48]. Due to her lack of a doctoral degree, the first author's educational background restricted her from fulfilling her aspiration of becoming an English teacher at a public university. Despite the challenges of the conflict between belief and practice and feelings of anxiety, disappointment, frustration and hopelessness, the first author withstood the pressure of a low salary and lack of benefits, and lack of opportunities for further study and participating in the Visiting Scholar Program and chose to become an English teacher at a private university in virtue of internal protection factors, such as previous teaching experience and beliefs, and contextual protection factors, such as communication with teachers and support from family. Meanwhile, she realized she is a resilient teacher who optimistically copes with adversities by managing negative emotions, planning time reasonably and actively seeking the support of the surrounding context, as defined in other research [49–51]. Her resilience during the pre-service stage

assumed a short-term role as an English teacher at a private university while also pursuing a long-term role by bolstering her confidence to overcome several difficulties during her future teaching career and throughout the process of pursuing a PhD.

6.1.2. In-Service Stage 1: Remaining Firm in the New Environment

The first author's first year of her teaching career as a novice university English teacher spanned from graduation to marriage. Similar to the study of Anderson and Olsen [52], she experienced feeling tired and overwhelmed in the first year of teaching; however, unlike the second-year teacher who participated in their research, who expressed frustration, the first author demonstrated a positive and optimistic attitude as well as high enthusiasm for teaching. Consequently, her performance in the teaching contest was outstanding. During this period, she encountered various pressures and challenges, such as a low salary, less personal time, intense and frequent teaching contests and insufficient academic research ability. Additionally, the training support provided by the university was ultimately ineffective in facilitating her professional development. She implemented healthy tactics [25] to fight by utilizing internal modifying factors, such as the belief in being a good teacher and previous experience, and actively seeking external support from colleagues, family and leaders.

6.1.3. In-Service Stage 2: Self-Avoidance across Multiple Roles

The physical changes during this stage, even the indications of threatened abortion in the early stage of pregnancy, did not diminish her resilience. What caused her resilience to decline rapidly was the conflict between her personal belief in herself as a good teacher and her practices not being accepted, which resulted in anxiety, burnout and emotional flooding. These factors have been shown to be personal risk factors that negatively impact teacher resilience [10,48].

Despite facing health challenges during her pregnancy, she remained committed to working diligently and prioritizing language teaching. As a result of her proactive efforts, she successfully secured approval for provincial projects and published a paper. However, she struggled with maintaining a proper work–life balance, and she failed to integrate into the changing environment due to her inability to attend all meetings and communicate effectively with new leaders and colleagues. Although related research and her previous stages of storytelling demonstrated that harmonious teacher–student interaction [3,10,47] and job satisfaction [48,53] play crucial roles in fostering teacher resilience, they were inadequate in enabling her to withstand the negative impact of the incongruence between teacher belief and practice and motivating her to exhibit high levels of resilience. She was experiencing less optimum resilience, which meant "social and emotional withdrawal" [25] (p. 246), resulting in reduced socialization with her colleagues and causing her to exhibit negative attitudes, such as emotional and social withdrawal, primarily due to her need to maintain her position as a teacher while completing necessary tasks.

6.1.4. In-Service Stage 3: Looking for Vitality in Challenging Circumstances

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a time for her to resume teaching after her maternity leave. Several studies have shed light on teachers' negative emotions during the pandemic, such as anxiety, stress and burnout due to inadequate technological pedagogical and content knowledge, insufficient effective teacher–student interaction, lack of adequate support and the heavier workload [26,54]. The factors mentioned above also acted as stressors for the first author. Additionally, work–life conflict was a significant source of stress for teachers, but this was particularly so for female teachers. Their child's age and the level of spousal support could moderately influence the working attitudes of female teachers [55]. As a novice teacher and mother, the first author alleviated her anxiety and found solace in the support of her family, particularly her husband, who assisted her in enhancing her technological skills. Notably, being at this stage of her experience allowed her to reassess her professional pursuits, personal life and aspirations. After experiencing anxiety, burnout

and even emotional flooding in the previous stage, she discovered that job satisfaction, well-being and the belief in being a good teacher were insufficient for advancing her professional development. Although Kunter et al. [56] also noted that professional belief, work-related motivation and self-regulation are essential for teacher professional competence, academic research ability and the pursuit of a PhD were other crucial factors in teachers' professional development, particularly within universities. Academic research ability could sometimes carry more weight than teaching skills regarding teacher professional promotion [57]. After careful personal deliberation and with the unwavering support of her family, her goal of pursuing a PhD took root firmly. She employed the defensive tactics of disconnection and isolation [25] within the teaching environment, relying on internal protective factors, such as work–life balance and proper time management, to bolster her resilience. Consequently, she was eligible to participate in the PhD examination in 2020.

6.1.5. In-Service Stage 4: Seizing the Opportunity Presented by Her Challenges

The first author was unsuccessful in her PhD program application in 2020. Nevertheless, she was fortunate to join Teacher X's team, and this partnership greatly enhanced her professional learning and academic research abilities, contributing significantly to her overall career development [58,59]. In the ensuing days, the multiple roles as a team member struggling with the number of people required to accomplish tasks, a university English teacher with a heavy workload, a mother caring for her child and a candidate preparing for the PhD application caused her to experience stress and fatigue [55,60,61]. At this stage, she employed healthy tactics [25] that primarily leveraged external protective factors, such as the guidance of Teacher X, encouragement from team members, support from her family and assistance from students. Her passion for teaching work and proactive pursuit of opportunities were instrumental in achieving success. High levels of resilience played a pivotal role throughout this process, culminating in the successful application for an industry–university research project under the Ministry of Education and the publication of her first SSCI book review.

6.1.6. In-Service Stage 5: Transcending in the Tumultuous Flow

The first author encountered unprecedented pressure and challenges that surged toward her like a torrent. She had to manage crucial tasks, such as undertaking more public lessons, applying for scientific research projects and preparing for a PhD program application. The recognition she received from leaders, colleagues and her professor contributed to her positive psychological factors of job satisfaction and well-being. These positive psychological factors, in turn, were instrumental in her building optimum resilience at this stage [62,63]. In addition, she optimized her work–life balance and actively pursued professional development with the support of her family. Consequently, she fulfilled her teaching responsibilities and successfully secured admission to the PhD program, realizing her long-cherished dream.

Early career teacher resilience was a continuous dynamic change process [22,64] influenced by modifying factors that caused fluctuations between less optimal and optimal levels of resilience, as described in the continuum of resilience model [25]. Additionally, the tactics within the continuum of resilience model [25] were identified in a manner that aligned closely with her own emotional and narrative experiences. Specifically, health tactics were characterized as fighting, defensive tactics involved seeking balance and survival tactics and entailed lying flat (see Figure 2).
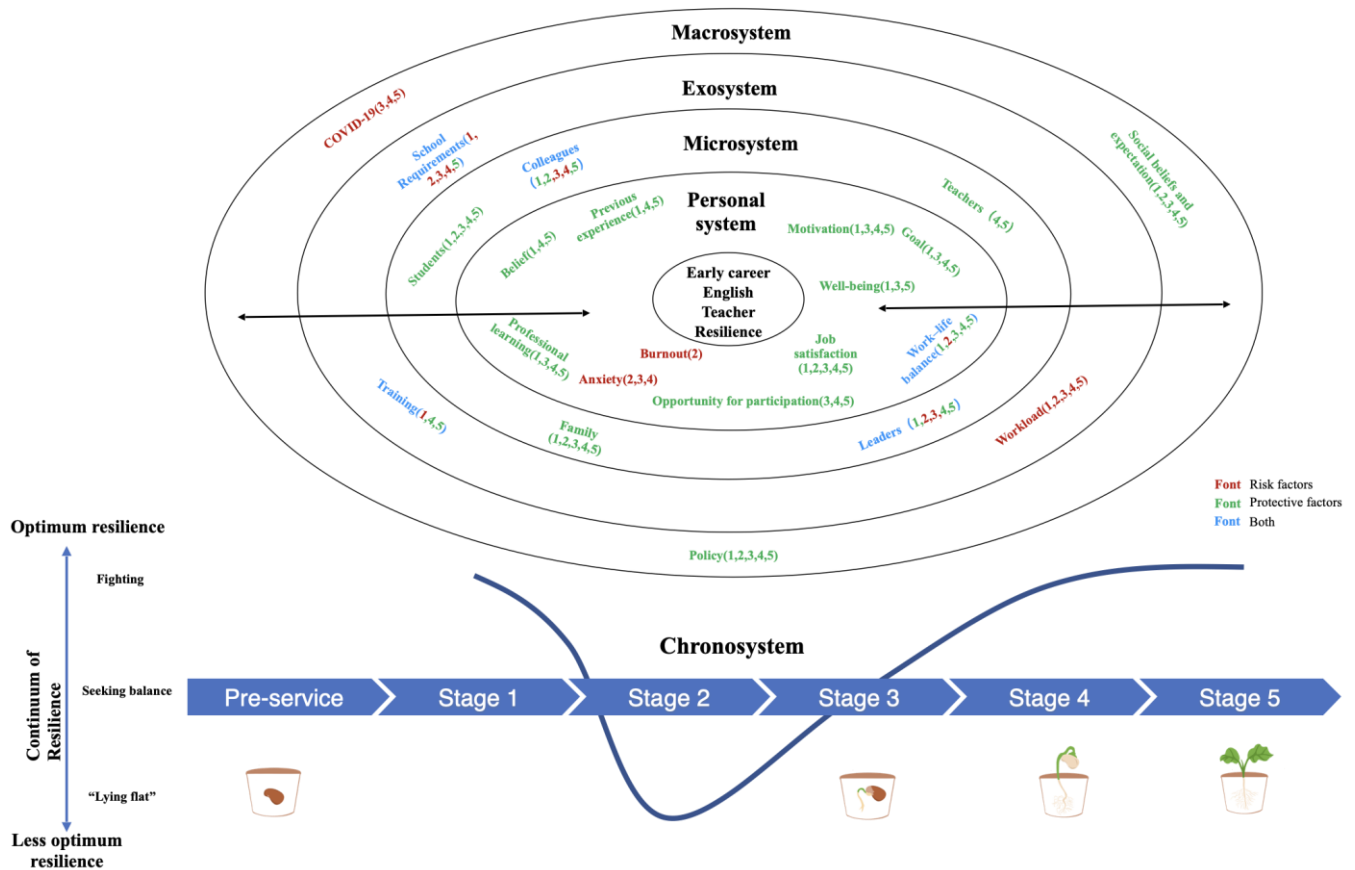
Figure 2. V-shaped nested ecological systems for early career university English teacher resilience.

6.2. Factors of Early Career English Teacher Resilience in Ecological Systems

This study, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's [12,13] ecological systems model and Mansfield et al.'s [14] study, further unveils the factors affecting the development of early career English teacher resilience from different ecological systems.

6.2.1. Personal System: Early Career University English Teacher's Individual Characteristics Associated with the Development of Resilience

Personal protective factors, risk factors and factors with both protective and risk properties were situated in a personal system based on Mansfield et al.'s [14] classification. Personal protective factors in a personal system, such as previous experience, belief, motivation, goal, well-being, job satisfaction, professional learning and the opportunity for participation, interplaying with the teacher's context, were of utmost importance in fostering early career teacher resilience. Teacher belief, for instance, was one of the critical personal protective factors affecting teacher resilience [65], which entails the ability to influence teachers' efforts, aspirations, and goals [66] when teachers are confronted with contextual risk factors, such as excessive pressure from academic research and teaching-related work. Beliefs about being a good English teacher and teacher learning drove the first author to pursue professional learning. Seizing opportunities to participate in an academic summit, study group and professional training facilitated her perpetual enhancement of her academic research and pedagogical skills, which was a pivotal endeavor in shaping her professional growth. Some positive psychological factors acted as personal protective factors, such as well-being and motivation, and were crucial in enhancing teacher resilience when she was confronted with risk factors like anxiety and burnout [51]. Teacher resilience and teacher well-being were mutually beneficial and complementary. Previous studies have shown that teacher resilience could predict, foster, maintain and improve teacher well-being [8,51,67]. Teacher well-being, in turn, was a significant determining factor of

teacher resilience and was bolstered by interactions with others' ecosystems. The well-being emerging from harmonious teacher–student relationships, high evaluations from students (rated as gentle and powerful) and support from her student friends enhanced her resilience. This motivated her to become a more resilient teacher to withstand the risk factors of burnout resulting from the discrepancy between teacher belief and practice [48] and anxiety induced by online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. There can be little doubt that the risk factors of burnout and anxiety diminish teacher resilience [48,53].

Notably, work–life balance was an essential adaptive coping strategy for fostering and developing teacher resilience [55,57]. However, in the different stages examined in this study, it was found that while work–life balance promoted early career teacher resilience as a protective factor that fostered early career teacher resilience, it also brought pressure as a risk factor. As noted in the previous investigation [68], the teaching profession blurred the boundaries between work and life, and achieving work–life balance was "a continuing struggle" [69] (p. 119), the suboptimal management of which resulted in a compromise on the quality of both family life and work. For example, the work–life imbalance during stage 2 of pregnancy impeded the first author's ability to assimilate into the new environment. It resulted in marginalization when interacting with others, ultimately hindering her resilience.

6.2.2. Microsystem: Early Career University English Teacher Resilience Emerged from the Immediate Teaching Setting

The microsystem examined in this study encompassed the interrelationship of students, family, essential teachers, colleagues and leaders. At the various stages of this study, the teacher–student relationship consistently served as a protective factor. A harmonious and trusting teacher–student relationship not only positively impacts teacher resilience [64,70,71] but also promotes academic achievement among students [72] and fosters their development of resilience [73]. In addition, the support and understanding of family play an essential role in promoting teacher resilience [48,71,74]; inversely, misunderstanding and non-support are the main factors of teacher anxiety. Family and children are often essential sources of stress, especially for female teachers who are married and have children [55,75]. Fortunately, the first author's family consistently provided her with unwavering support throughout these pivotal stages of her career development, enabling her to balance her work and personal life effectively. From the pre-service stage to resignation, the exertion of resilience at any stage was closely tied to the encouragement and support provided by family members. This was especially true during the online teaching process during the COVID-19 pandemic. With her family's untiring assistance, she could teach students effectively and find the time for review to prepare for her PhD program application. The relationships with leaders and colleagues could serve as a protective factor for early career English teacher resilience and be a potential source of stress. Maintaining positive relationships with leaders and colleagues is crucial in promoting the development of teacher resilience while also recognizing the potential impact on the teacher's well-being; however, the converse does not hold [69–71].

6.2.3. Exosystem: Early Career University English Teacher Resilience in Meeting the Demands of the Teaching Context

The factors of workload, school requirements and training were categorized into the exosystem in this study. Evidence from other studies suggests that workload is a significant source of pressure and a challenge for teachers [10,47,76,77]. For university teachers, except for teaching-related work (e.g., a high number of class hours, teaching contests and attendance at lectures), non-teaching workload, such as academic research workload [57,78–80], frequent meetings and instructing/coaching students in competitions, lead to feelings of burnout and anxiety. This may result in an inability to maintain a healthy work–life balance. School requirements were identified as the primary source of the teacher's workload, which can be considered both a protective and a risk factor within the exosystem of this study. The school's requirements significantly negatively impact

teacher resilience, resulting in immense work pressure that prompts many teachers to resign. However, many rewards, including academic research and competition incentives, often accompany the school requirements. For example, after the publication of her first SSCI paper, the first author was rewarded by the school, recognized by her faculty and supported by her leaders. This experience instilled in her the confidence and courage to confront various challenges at work, enabling her to better leverage her resilience. Training is a crucial means of enhancing teachers' professional competence. However, its impact on teacher resilience varies depending on timing, frequency, content and degree to which teachers actively engage in the training. Excessive training in the first in-service stage of the first author's career, particularly frequent training unrelated to her major, induced stress. If this were to persist, it could lead to burnout and anxiety, negatively impacting her resilience. At the same time, the training provided at the fourth and fifth stages was tailored to suit her major as an early career English teacher. She actively selected and participated in this training, stimulating their motivation and enhancing her professional development. Faced with a heavy workload, she could leverage the training to fully utilize her resilience and strengthen her competencies.

6.2.4. Macrosystem: Early Career University English Teacher Resilience in a Wider Sociocultural Context

The macrosystem incorporates the contextual factors of the social beliefs and expectations of teachers and those embodied in the policy, as well as COVID-19. Social beliefs and expectations, crucial factors in promoting teacher resilience, were constantly perceived virtually by teachers. For example, imparting knowledge and educating people were deeply ingrained in the first author. Despite being an ordinary educator, she continuously aspired for her students to perceive a resilient teacher within the classroom, thus fostering their resilience and academic achievement [72]. Although the excessive workload and insufficient academic research ability brought her immense pressure, she always considered it her responsibility as a university teacher to excel in this field. It was also the direction that she had been striving towards. The social beliefs and expectations of university teachers encouraged her to adopt positive coping strategies, regulate her emotions and persevere in the face of difficulties, all of which promoted her resilience. Under the policy requirement, it was inevitable and urgent for university teachers to upgrade to a PhD. In this study, from the first author's time as a pre-service teacher to her departure after five years, this policy motivated her to work towards becoming a PhD and was highlighted in pre-service and stages 3, 4 and 5.

6.2.5. Chronosystem: Dynamic Change in Early Career University English Teacher Resilience over Time

Situating early career English teacher resilience in a chronosystem, we found that early career English teacher resilience underwent dynamic changes from stages 1 to 5, exhibiting a roughly V-shaped pattern (see Figure 2) with a Fighting–Lying flat–Seeking balance–Fighting–Fighting trajectory. These findings not only confirm the conclusion of previous studies that the development of teacher resilience is a complex and dynamic process [18,49,76] but also indicate that the influencing factors of teacher resilience in each ecological system may not always be present at every stage of teacher development. Along with the diverse impacts of these factors on teachers, they serve as protective factors to enhance teacher resilience during their development or act as risk factors that impose significant pressure and challenges on teachers at different stages. For example, training was only present in stages 1, 4 and 5, but not always. Another example is that the impact of school requirements on teacher resilience varied at different stages yet remained significant throughout her early career teaching.

6.3. The V-Shaped Nested Ecological Systems for Early Career English Teacher Resilience

Drawing upon the study's analytical framework, which was inspired by the continuum of resilience model [25] and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory/model [12,13], we

propose a model of V-shaped nested ecological systems for early career English teacher resilience (V-shaped model for short; see Figure 2). This model portrays the dynamic development of early career English teacher resilience in the professional trajectory but also systematically illustrates the risk and protective roles of personal and contextual factors in shaping the teacher's capacity for resilience to address setbacks during the different teaching phases.

Early career university English teachers, especially those working at private universities, encounter an array of obstacles brought on by classroom, family and interpersonal relationships. They do not continually maintain optimal resilience and feel exhausted in the process of responding to teaching and life realities. Specifically, in this study, in the first in-service stage of her career, the teacher possessed an optimal level of resilience due to the protective factors from the personal system (i.e., motivation, work–life balance and well-being) and microsystem (i.e., students, family and leader). However, in the subsequent stage, the teacher's resilience significantly declined to become less optimal—that is, the teacher tended to lie flat—mainly because of a discrepancy between her beliefs about what makes a good teacher and the reality, full of pressure. In the third stage, the teacher's resilience gradually increased due to the positive influence of both personal protective factors and external ones, such as support from family and students in the microsystem. Despite obstacles in the fourth and fifth stages, teacher resilience, a crucial personal strength for sustainable professional development, reached its pinnacle as the teacher demonstrated unwavering determination and perseverance to overcome adversities.

The university English teacher, as a developing person [13], endeavored to participate in the ecological systems where she operated and actively captured the affordances from her personal strengths and contextual resources to respond to multiple challenges. Simultaneously, the teacher could maintain positive emotions, seek rejuvenation through further study and cooperation with experienced university teachers, and seize opportunities to improve her teaching and research competencies, thus promoting sustainable professional development under the synergetic effects of multiple ecological elements. In sum, the university English teacher, situated in a complex and competitive educational context, did not always maintain a high level of resilience to deal with those challenges and pressure. The teacher's capacity for resilience usually experienced dynamic fluctuation due to the occurrence of critical incidents and was shaped and developed by the interdependence and interaction between the agentic teacher and ecological systems.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The current study adopted a self-narrative method to explore the change and development of the resilience of an early career English teacher. A five-stage V-shaped developmental trajectory of early career English teacher resilience emerged in this study: Fighting–Lying flat–Seeking balance–Fighting–Fighting change and development. Additionally, putting this trajectory into the complex ecological system [12,13] and drawing upon Hunter and Chandler's [25] continuum of resilience model, this study yielded the proposed V-shaped nested ecological systems for early career English teacher resilience, demystifying how the teacher survived and thrived by seeking resilience in her pre-service and first five years of in-service teaching career. This contributive model highlights the interconnectedness of the early pre-service stage [81,82] and the later complicated in-service developmental phases, each of which is bridged by the interactions of the teacher with the ecological systems. External variables (i.e., colleagues and students) and internal factors (i.e., motivation and well-being) in the dynamic interactions motivated the teacher to undergo a high-low-high track where teacher resilience emerged, fluctuated, declined and revived. This V-shaped model inspired us to reconceptualize language teacher resilience as a psychological capacity shaped and developed in the teacher's interactions and the ecology, further showing the dual ecological and psychological attributes of resilience. In addition to the proposal of the V-shaped model, the current study utilized the self-narrative study for examining language teacher resilience, which has rarely been done in prior studies. It

illuminated a new possible approach for excavating individual teachers' unique features of resilience.

In an ever-challenging teaching environment, professional learning and development constitute a never-ending process for teachers. Reflection enables individual teachers to undergo this process. Therefore, individual teachers are encouraged to document their feelings, emotions, actions and coping strategies when they encounter stress and challenges to conduct a self-narrative study to identify their personal and contextual strengths. In addition, early career teachers must comprehend the pivotal roles of factors within each ecosystem in fostering resilience and leverage the resources available to overcome the challenges they encounter. Therefore, it is essential for individual teachers to improve their awareness and emotion regulation ability to alleviate negative emotions, enhance their motivation, foster their resilience and promote students' learning achievements [62]. Furthermore, early career teachers must remain steadfast in their beliefs and be able to transform unfavorable conditions into favorable ones through active interaction with their external contexts. Such an advantageous environment necessitates early career teachers' proactive pursuits and support from leaders, family and colleagues. Notably, leaders should also comprehend the distinctiveness of each phase of teachers' professional development, attend to and fulfill teachers' needs, and create an advantageous environment for their advancement. In particular, issues of appropriate workload for teachers in different conditions should perhaps be taken into account. This would assist early career teachers in avoiding burnout, "lying flat" and resigning, and activate their resilience at different working and life stages. In addition, it is essential for leaders to organize major-relevant, content-rich training and determine the right amount of such training for early career teachers, such as the training of technological pedagogical and content knowledge, academic research methodology and frontier theories of teaching content. Lastly, it would be preferable if the learning community could be actualized into practice, for instance, through workshops within universities and cooperation with external experts.

The study faced certain limitations. A broader range of subjects could be selected in future research, including early career English teachers of varying genders and educational backgrounds. Additionally, more comprehensive research methods, such as mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches, could be employed to investigate the correlations between other psychological factors and the resilience of early-career English teachers.

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