

Staying in Kahramanmaraş after the Earthquakes: Moral Meaning, Relational Anchors and Institutional Conditions in Primary-School Classroom Teachers' Accounts 1st

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Abstract

Research on teachers in disaster-affected settings documents hardship and coping but says little about those who stay and what staying means to them. This study examines how primary-school classroom teachers who kept working in Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye, after the 6 February 2023 earthquakes make sense of staying, what motivates them, how they experience organisational and institutional conditions, and what support they say they need. Reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with 12 teachers produced five themes: staying as a morally charged and ambivalent undertaking; relational and moral anchors in children, faith, love of the profession and conscientious responsibility; school and community conditions easing staying; limited institutional recognition and material return; and a wish for shared psychosocial spaces. Staying emerged as a morally invested practice anchored in relationships and conditioned by institutions. We tentatively propose that institutions may take teachers' commitment for granted (moral subsidy). Findings are interpretive, from a small, stayers-only sample.

1 Introduction

Teaching is relational work that demands sustained emotional labour (Day & Gu, 2010). Decisions to remain in or leave teaching are shaped by interacting individual, school-level and contextual factors (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020); school climate, principal support and need satisfaction are associated with job satisfaction and commitment (Collie et al., 2016), and school-level stressors with burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). A global teacher shortage makes retention a pressing policy issue (UNESCO, 2024), especially in crisis-affected settings (Falk et al., 2019).

Disasters disrupt the conditions that sustain teachers' emotional labour and commitment: teachers must keep teaching while coping with their own losses, meeting students' psychosocial needs and, at times, acting as first responders (Falk et al., 2019). After the Christchurch earthquakes, role conflict, role overload and the degree to which a school was affected were associated with burnout, and role overload predicted intention to leave through emotional exhaustion (Kuntz et al., 2013). Secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are a further risk (Oberg et al., 2023; Ormiston et al., 2022).

A smaller body of work asks why teachers remain in difficult conditions. In challenging English schools, stayers pointed to making a difference, rewarding relationships with pupils, collegial support and feeling valued by school leaders (Arthur & Bradley, 2023), and a systematic review found that financial incentives helped attract teachers to hard-to-staff schools but not retain them (See et al., 2020). In conflict-affected settings, teachers in Philippine municipalities stayed through a moral-relational practice of duty to students' futures, faith-based commitment and belonging (Pregoner et al., 2026), and teachers in Myanmar's non-state schools sustained engagement through moral purpose, professional commitment and relational ties (No & Lustick, 2026). After the 2018 Central Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami, teachers acted as agents of community resilience shaped by religiosity and mutual assistance (Parrott et al., 2024). These studies were conducted elsewhere and mostly describe what sustains

teachers; few examine how teachers who remained interpret their own staying, and how that interpretation relates to relational and institutional conditions where leaving was institutionally available.

On 6 February 2023, two major earthquakes centred in Kahramanmaraş province affected the learning of more than five million students across 11 provinces (World Bank, 2023). Teachers were also offered ways out: by 11 March 2023, 1,080 had been transferred out of the earthquake provinces (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2023b). A further transfer window opened on 5–7 July 2023 without the usual length-of-service requirement (MoNE, 2023c), and in May 2024 teachers moved after the earthquakes were allowed to apply to return (MoNE, 2024).

1.1 Context: the teaching profession, service points and post-earthquake support

In Türkiye, teachers are civil servants appointed and moved through a centralised system. Their “service points” depend on the development level of the area in which they work and rank them in transfer applications. After the earthquakes, which closed schools for weeks, MoNE reportedly contacted teachers in the affected provinces individually about shelter needs, and housing problems were handled with the Ministry of the Interior and provincial governorates (MoNE, 2023a).

Qualitative studies in Türkiye since the earthquakes have mainly documented difficulties, needs and coping: problems on returning to education (Özdemir & Erol, 2024), preschool teachers’ experiences (Aydos et al., 2025), traumatic grief and criticism of the system in Hatay (Kabaklı Çimen, 2025), special education teachers’ lived experiences (Erdem & Aslan, 2025) and intertwined personal and professional burdens (Çifçi, 2026). Quantitative work relates teacher well-being and resilience in the region to responsible leadership and leader–member exchange (Bellibaş et al., 2026; Palaz et al., 2026), and a study of principals after the Christchurch earthquakes shows that leaders’ actions are shaped by dispositional, relational and contextual factors (Mutch, 2015).

Most of this literature therefore asks what is difficult and what is needed. Fewer studies ask what staying means to teachers who remained, which sources of motivation they link to it, and how those sources relate to organisational conditions. The question is pertinent for Turkish classroom teachers, who normally continue with the same class through the four primary grades and teach all subjects to it (MoNE, 2014, Art. 43[2–3]), which enables close and continuous relationships with pupils (Ay & Bümen, 2023).

We contribute by linking three things that the literature treats separately: the moral meaning teachers give to staying, the relationships that anchor it, and the institutional conditions that make it more or less costly. We differ from the closest work (Pregoner et al., 2026; No & Lustick, 2026) in examining a state system with centrally administered transfer options and in asking what teachers say they receive from institutions in return. The aim of this study is to examine how primary-school classroom teachers who continued working in Kahramanmaraş after the 6 February 2023 earthquakes make sense of working and staying there, what motivates them, how they experience school-level (organisational), community

and policy-level (institutional) conditions, and what support they say they need. Four research questions guide it:

RQ1. How do participants make sense of being a teacher in the earthquake region and of staying there?

RQ2. How do they experience and express the sources of motivation that sustain their teaching?

RQ3. How do they experience organisational and institutional conditions (school leadership, colleagues, community, policy and infrastructure)?

RQ4. What support do they say they need to continue teaching?

2 Conceptual Framework

We used the concepts below as sensitising concepts, not as a coding frame: coding was inductive.

2.1 Staying, commitment and embeddedness

Staying is often treated as the absence of leaving, yet the same behaviour can reflect very different experiences. Meyer and Allen (1991) distinguish affective (wanting to stay), continuance (needing to stay because leaving is costly or alternatives are lacking) and normative commitment (feeling one ought to stay). Job embeddedness theory adds that people stay because of links to others, fit with their organisation and community, and what they would sacrifice by leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001), including embeddedness in the community outside the job (Lee et al., 2004). Commitment can also have other foci, such as an occupation (Meyer et al., 1993); here the object of staying is a region and a profession rather than a single school, so we examine the meaning attached to staying rather than treat it as an index of commitment.

2.2 Moral purpose, moral rewards, demoralisation, recognition and moral subsidy

Santoro (2011, 2018) explains why teachers leave not only through burnout but through demoralisation: conditions prevent them from reaching their understanding of good teaching and so deprive them of its moral rewards. We use this work to ask under what conditions teachers keep access to moral rewards while staying. Teaching also carries emotional labour (Hargreaves, 1998) and, for some, a sense of calling, which can sustain commitment but is double-edged because it exposes workers to demands that institutions fail to meet (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition (love and care, rights, social esteem) frames our reading of accounts of children, employment rights and professional standing.

We also use moral subsidy as a sensitising proposition: workers' moral commitment covers costs that institutions would otherwise have to meet, so that the institution benefits without a corresponding return. The idea draws on Bunderson and Thompson (2009) and is close to effort–reward imbalance (Siegrist, 1996), psychological contract breach (Rousseau, 1989) and moral injury (Litz et al., 2009), but it locates

the mechanism in the institution's reliance on teachers' moral commitment, not in individual strain or a broken promise. Because our data are teachers' perceptions, the term describes what teachers perceive, not how institutions behave.

2.3 Resilience as relational and contextual

Teacher resilience is increasingly understood as a dynamic process shaped by context and relationships rather than a trait (Beltman et al., 2011; Gu, 2014; Hong, 2012; Mansfield et al., 2016), including reappraisal of adversity (Clarà, 2017). Our contrast is therefore with resilience understood as adaptation: we ask what staying means morally to teachers and what it costs them. Meaning-making (Park, 2010), religious coping (Pargament, 1997), posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), community resilience (Norris et al., 2008) and the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) further inform our reading.

3 Method

3.1 Design

This qualitative, experiential study uses Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022) to investigate how classroom teachers make sense of staying and working in Kahramanmaraş after the February 2023 earthquakes. RTA allows the inductive generation of shared patterns of meaning across emotional narratives (e.g., trauma, devotion) and evaluative reflections (e.g., policy discontinuity), while acknowledging the researchers' interpretive role (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.2 Researchers and reflexivity

The researchers live in the region and experienced the earthquakes themselves, which may have shaped what we found plausible or unremarkable. The first author is an academic trained in qualitative methods; the second author, a primary school teacher, conducted all the interviews and shares a collegial relationship with the participants, approaching the fieldwork as an insider. We kept a reflexive research journal (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

3.3 Participants

Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling (Patton, 2015); eligible teachers were approached through the researchers' networks and invited individually, so the sample also has convenience elements. Of 14 teachers approached, two declined. The criteria were (a) working as a classroom teacher in Kahramanmaraş on 6 February 2023 and (b) still working in the province at the time of the interview; temporary departures followed by a return were not exclusionary. We judged sample size by information power (Malterud et al., 2016) and considered the limits of saturation in RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Nine participants were women and three men, aged 28–42, with 5–15 years of service; ten held a bachelor's degree and two (T2, T7) a master's degree. Teachers reported low ($n = 2$), moderate ($n = 7$) or high ($n = 3$) physical damage to their schools (Table 1). A pilot interview with a teacher outside the sample was not analysed.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

3.4 Data generation

Data were collected between 7 and 14 September 2026 with a semi-structured interview guide drafted from the literature and reviewed by two academics in educational sciences (Appendix A). Three interviews were held online and nine face to face in schools; they lasted about 45 minutes on average, were audio-recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim in Turkish.

3.5 Ethics

The study was approved by the Social and Humanities Sciences Ethics Committee of Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University (decision no. 560074, date 19.08.2026). Participants were informed of the purpose, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, recording and data storage, and gave written informed consent. They are identified by codes (T1–T12), and identifying details were generalised. Data are kept for five years, as the committee required, on a password-protected, encrypted drive.

3.6 Data analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019, 2022) six phases: familiarisation, systematic inductive coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up with the conceptual framework. Interpretation in later phases was informed by the sensitising concepts, and codes and themes were treated as constructed through the researchers’ engagement with the data, not as “emerging” from it.

In RTA a theme’s value lies in the depth of insight it provides, not in how many participants voiced it (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022). We therefore do not rank themes by frequency or draw conclusions from counts; the participant codes in Table 2 show how widely a pattern appeared, not how important it is. Instead of independent coding by a second researcher, which does not fit the reflexive paradigm, selected coding decisions and candidate themes were discussed with a critical friend to surface alternative readings (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

3.7 Trustworthiness

We addressed quality through Tracy’s (2010) criteria and Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2022) guidance. For credibility, four participants reviewed their transcripts and flagged ambiguous statements; two proposed minor corrections. We used this review to improve interpretive clarity, not to validate the findings (Birt et al., 2016). For transferability we describe the sample and context in detail; for transparency, an audit trail and reflexive journal record how themes were developed and decisions made (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We followed the SRQR reporting standards (O’Brien et al., 2014).

4 Findings

Table 2 lists the codes and the participants who contributed to each subtheme.

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, main codes and contributing participants

Theme 1. Staying as a morally charged and ambivalent undertaking

Loyalty, belonging and self-sacrifice

Several teachers described staying as a debt of loyalty and as belonging, and others as self-sacrifice and devotion. For T5, staying was a moral obligation to the place she was born in and to her pupils:

“This is my hometown. I believe I owe it a debt of loyalty. My conscience has never allowed me to leave my pupils and their parents in the lurch.” (T5)

T2 similarly connected staying with a sense of belonging and responsibility: “I felt that I could not simply leave this place when my students and the people here were still trying to recover.” In T2’s account, staying is not an individual preference but a responsibility to others. T5’s account makes the normative element explicit, in Meyer and Allen’s (1991) sense: it rests on what she feels she ought to do.

Fear, loss and necessity

Alongside this, participants described the emotional cost of staying. Fear and trauma, loss and sorrow, and staying as a necessity (“life going on”) were voiced by different participants. T3 recalled that “it was a bit frightening at first”. T9 tied the weight of shared experience to the fact that everyone had suffered some loss. Several participants voiced both sides: T3 in the self-sacrifice and the fear and necessity accounts, T8 in the loyalty, loss, fear and necessity accounts, and T4 combining belonging with loss. Because T3’s remark refers to the early period, the co-occurrence of loyalty and fear is an interpretive reading across accounts, not something a single extract shows. Staying can thus be at once a moral commitment and an endured necessity: its meaning is a field of tension, not a single stance.

Interrupted presence and return (a single case)

T6’s account shows that staying was not always uninterrupted physical presence. After leaving her family in a safe place she felt guilty and asked herself, “Why did I leave them behind?”; she returned to the city and worked in a soup kitchen. She also said that help from outside and the unity of the people moved her. Her account adds a moral dimension to staying: guilt at having left and a return she described as called for by others’ suffering.

Theme 2. Relational and moral anchors of staying

Children: love, care and a widened role

Relationships with children were present in the accounts of all twelve participants. T11 said:

“The only thing that motivates me is love for children. Innocent, pure love.” (T11)

T11 also spoke of love of the profession and of expected compensation, so “the only thing” emphasises the primacy of the children rather than excluding other reasons. Because every participant spoke of children, we read this as a shared anchor, not a distinguishing feature. T5, T6 and T12 foregrounded empathy and responsibility. T5 put it this way:

“When I put my own children in my pupils’ place, I understood that I could not betray them.” (T5)

After the earthquakes, the psychological support and guidance side of teaching became more prominent in many accounts. Some participants, women and men, described feeling like a parent or protector to their pupils, and others reported greater sensitivity to what pupils had been through. Participants thus described staying as continuing a role wider than instruction, one that includes care and protection. They presented this widening as meaningful; whether it was also a burden our data do not show. Motivation here lies not only inside the teacher but in the relationship with the children.

Reciprocity: witnessing recovery and mutual strengthening

Witnessing pupils’ recovery was a separate source of motivation for several participants, and some described the teacher–pupil relationship as mutually strengthening: “I felt that my students needed me, but at the same time, they also gave me strength.” (T10)

Faith, love of the profession and conscientious responsibility

Faith made staying easier for several participants and was described as a source of strength during the post-earthquake period. For T8, “our faith became even stronger” by the end of the process, which increased her motivation to remain. Others stressed love of the profession and personal satisfaction; T1 said, “because I love the profession, I suppose my endurance was greater.” Others emphasised a sense of duty and a clear conscience. T12 wanted to do her job properly and be at peace with her conscience, and worked harder to turn adverse conditions into positive ones. Here, motivation is an inner satisfaction but also a moral responsibility toward work that has to be done.

Civic duty, material and social reasons alongside intrinsic motivation

Participants did not conceal extrinsic reasons. T2 said:

“Of course, one of the most important reasons is that I earn money.” (T2)

He placed this alongside the satisfaction he drew from the work itself. T8 noted that the respect and affection she received as a teacher continued. A sense of social service and of contributing to the state was voiced by T4, who said “we had to help our state too” and “we were in the thick of it”. We treat this as a civic or national duty, separate from material or status reasons.

Theme 3. School and community conditions perceived as easing staying

Understanding leadership, flexibility and school climate

Many participants described their administrators' humane and understanding approach as a condition that made staying easier. T8's account of her principal is an example:

"My principal never made me feel that I was alone in what I was going through. He was understanding when I was struggling, listened to me without judging me, and tried to support me whenever he could. Knowing that there was someone at school who understood what I was experiencing made it easier for me to continue working." (T8)

Some participants spoke of institutional flexibility in time and task arrangements after the earthquakes, and others of a positive school climate and a sense of belonging. T7 described the "double-shift (morning/afternoon) schooling" arrangement in his school as a helpful flexibility.

Collegial solidarity and communal unity

Many participants stressed support among colleagues and a shared fate, and others stressed communal unity and help from outside the school. T12 said that sharing the same fate strengthened solidarity. T1 described strangers' hospitality as healing:

"Sometimes, when I was walking around the neighbourhood or going from one place to another, local people would see us and say, 'Come in, please. Have something to eat, have some tea.' They did not know us personally, but they still welcomed us and wanted to help. In those moments, hearing 'come in, please' was so meaningful to me. It makes you feel so good psychologically, because you realise that people have not forgotten you and that you are not alone." (T1)

For T1 and T6, solidarity was both a source of support and, in T6's case, a moral pull that called her back to the region.

Theme 4. Limited institutional recognition and material return

This theme brings together what participants said wore staying down and what they asked of institutions in return, presented separately where they differ.

Policy discontinuity, infrastructure and the physical environment

Some participants described policy discontinuity and curriculum changes as corrosive, and others physical and infrastructural inadequacies. T9 likened constantly changing practices to "yap-boz" (build-and-break), a Turkish idiom for things that are made and unmade again and again. T11 pointed to inadequate roads and infrastructure. Requests in this area mirror these conditions: several participants asked for improvements to roads, transport and the physical environment. Curriculum change and similar features resemble general features of teaching in Türkiye rather than disaster-specific ones, so we treat them as background to post-disaster work, not as effects of the earthquake. Policy discontinuity (national level) and infrastructure (local and school level) differ in level; we group them because participants spoke of both as institutional shortcomings.

Professional standing, recognition and material compensation

Some participants described problems with employment rights and a weakening of professional standing. Several asked for professional standing and respect to be restored. T4 wanted complaint mechanisms to be filtered, particularly so that unfounded or minor complaints from parents would not immediately be treated as formal complaints against teachers:

“Sometimes a parent could make a complaint without really knowing what had happened, and the teacher would immediately be held responsible. There should be someone who listens to both sides and checks whether the complaint is actually justified before taking action.” (T4)

T5 similarly emphasised the need for clearer rules that would protect teachers’ professional standing:

“There needs to be a regulation that reminds everyone that teachers also deserve respect. We need discipline not only for teachers but also for those who speak to teachers disrespectfully.” (T5)

Some participants voiced requests for compensation and additional payments, and others for flexibility in placement and for service-point increases and incentives. T11 expected an arrangement for teachers in the region similar to the regional hardship allowance (known as the ‘eastern allowance’); T5 asked for flexibility to be assigned to different places; T10 considered the service-point scheme inadequate; and T12 expected recognition mechanisms such as additional service points. Read together, these requests show that teachers’ needs are not only psychological but also concern recognition, status and material return.

Housing and shelter

T1 valued housing support during the period of tent and container settlements, which suggests that basic shelter was a condition that made staying possible for her. T5 and T10, by contrast, asked for housing as something teachers in the region should be given.

Theme 5. Shared spaces for sharing and support

Participants wanted social activities and trips, group therapy and spaces for sharing, and also psychological counselling. T1 emphasised the need to talk in a group:

“I think what we needed most was to sit together and talk. Everyone had experienced something different, but we were all carrying similar feelings. Sometimes you do not need someone to give you advice; you just need to talk with people who have been through the same thing and know that they understand you.” (T1)

T4 similarly highlighted the value of collective activities:

“We needed activities that would take our minds away from the earthquake for a while. Even a simple trip or spending some time together outside school would have been good for us. Being together, talking and

doing something different would have helped us feel a little better.” (T4)

5 Discussion

This study examined what staying means to classroom teachers who continued to work in Kahramanmaraş after the 2023 earthquakes. In their accounts, staying is neither simply resilience nor simply constraint: it is a morally invested practice anchored in relationships, whose sustainability depends on institutional conditions. We develop this in four claims.

Our findings resemble the moral-relational practice described in the Philippines (Pregoner et al., 2026) and the moral purpose and relational ties described in Myanmar (No & Lustick, 2026): duty to pupils, faith and belonging anchored staying, and faith and religiosity also appear after the Sulawesi disaster (Parrott et al., 2024). We differ in that participants worked in a state system with centrally administered transfer options and tied staying closely to what they asked of institutions in return: recognition, material return and tools of mobility. Consistent with Arthur and Bradley (2023) and See et al. (2020), pay alone does not explain staying: participants spoke of making a difference, relationships with pupils and feeling valued by leaders, and their requests for compensation sit alongside these. Three features of the Turkish context matter. First, teaching is widely spoken of as a “sacred profession” and as service to the state; T4’s “we had to help our state too” may draw on this discourse, which can both motivate and make it harder to ask for a return. Second, teachers are civil servants whose mobility is governed by service points, so requests for incentives are also about exit.

Staying carries more than one commitment, and a widened role

Loyalty, belonging and self-sacrifice appear in the same accounts as fear, loss and necessity. In Meyer and Allen’s (1991) terms, belonging reads as affective, the debt of loyalty and conscientious responsibility as normative, and necessity and income as continuance commitment; the three do not sort into different teachers, since some participants voiced several. Staying is therefore a poor indicator of commitment on its own, because the same act can be wanted and endured. T6’s single account suggests that staying was not always unbroken presence and was shaped by what one owes to others, resonating with the normative reading. The widened role is consistent with accounts of teachers’ roles extending beyond instruction after disasters (Falk et al., 2019) and with Çifçi’s (2026) finding that personal and professional burdens intertwine.

Motivation is expressed through personal convictions and through relationships

Participants described the sources of staying both as personal convictions (faith, love of the profession, conscience) and as relationships with children, colleagues and the community, which fits relational conceptualisations of teacher resilience and commitment (Day & Gu, 2010; Gu, 2014; Norris et al., 2008). Children were not only the object of care: witnessing their recovery and being strengthened by them formed a reciprocal loop, so that demanding work also rewarded teachers, and the wider role is a relation of care (Noddings, 1984) and not only a task. Participants’ own fear and loss are a primary

exposure, whereas secondary traumatic stress arises from exposure to others' trauma (Oberg et al., 2023; Ormiston et al., 2022); our data cannot separate the two. T8's "our faith became even stronger" can be read as reappraisal of adversity (Clarà, 2017), religious coping (Pargament, 1997), meaning-making (Park, 2010) and, cautiously, posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Acknowledged extrinsic reasons (income, respect) sit alongside intrinsic ones, and T4's civic duty fits neither category neatly.

Moral rewards persist alongside institutional erosion

Santoro's (2011, 2018) framework allows a two-way reading. Children, faith and conscientious responsibility look like sources of continued access to moral rewards, whereas policy discontinuity, inadequate infrastructure and perceived loss of standing resemble the conditions Santoro links to demoralisation. By institutional rewards we mean pay, status, working conditions and recognition. Because the sample comprises only teachers who stayed and cannot be compared with leavers, our data do not show whether demoralisation is present or absent; what we observe is a tension between moral rewards and eroded institutional rewards. Because quantitative work shows that well-being varies with organisational factors (Bellibaş et al., 2026; Palaz et al., 2026), these motivation accounts are not evidence of high well-being. Grievances such as pay, standing and policy change are widely voiced in Türkiye; what is specific to the post-earthquake setting is housing, service points, placement flexibility and the wish for shared psychosocial spaces.

This tension suggests, tentatively, a moral subsidy: teachers' perception that their moral commitment covers costs that institutions have not met. Participants kept working and caring while asking for recognition, material return, stable policy and adequate infrastructure, a pattern that Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) double-edged calling helps to read. We offer moral subsidy as a conceptual proposition grounded in teachers' perceptions. Our data cannot show that institutions rely on teachers' commitment: we have no institutional data or evidence of change over time, and several participants valued the support they received, such as understanding principals and, for T1, housing.

Organisational conditions, recognition and service points

Understanding leaders, flexibility and collegial solidarity were experienced as conditions that made staying more manageable, in line with research on leadership and teacher well-being (Bellibaş et al., 2026; Palaz et al., 2026), principals in post-disaster schools (Mutch, 2015) and school climate (Collie et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Teachers' requests did not stop at psychosocial support, however: they asked for material compensation, housing, restored standing and improved physical conditions, which suggests that "well-being programmes" alone may be insufficient. Read through Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, the request for restored standing is a claim to be seen as a professional of worth: requests about rights and standing correspond to the spheres of rights and esteem, and accounts of children to the sphere of care. The service-point paradox deserves attention: incentives meant to make serving in a hard region worthwhile also give teachers a way out, and teachers who described a debt of loyalty asked for such tools.

5.1 Implications

Theoretical. First, staying should be conceptualised as a multi-component, morally charged practice, not a single index of commitment. Second, motivation to stay is expressed through relationships as well as convictions, so resilience-based accounts should include relational and moral sources of continuation. Third, moral and institutional rewards can diverge, which future work could examine in relation to demoralisation. These propositions come from a small, retrospective, stayers-only sample and need testing elsewhere.

Practical. Our findings rest on participants' expectations, not on tests of effects, and point to four lines of action: (a) support flexible, understanding school leadership (e.g., flexible scheduling after a disaster, regular listening); (b) provide collegial psychosocial spaces for sharing experiences (participants described shared settings and activities as well as individual counselling, though the guide did not ask them to choose); (c) review recognition mechanisms for teachers in the region, including personal rights, noting that service points reward service and also ease leaving; and (d) improve school infrastructure and transport.

6 Limitations and future research

Limitations concern the sample and design, the data and the analysis. Sample and design. First, only teachers who stayed are included: those with unsupportive leaders or fewer ties may have left, which may explain why no participant described unsupportive leadership, and recruitment through the researchers' networks may have favoured positive accounts. Second, the study covers one province and classroom teachers only, with participants of 5–15 years of service; principals, subject, novice and near-retirement teachers, newcomers and permanent leavers are not represented. Third, twelve participants allow no statistical generalisation.

Data. Fourth, interviews were short (about 45 minutes) and mixed online and face-to-face modes. Fifth, personal loss, family circumstances, whether teachers were native to the region or assigned, and appointment type were not collected, which limits interpretation of accounts of fear, loss and loyalty.

Analysis. Sixth, the first author coded the data, with selected decisions discussed with a critical friend; single coding is not a flaw in reflexive analysis, but other readings are possible. Seventh, the second author's collegial relationship with participants may have affected what they said, particularly about administrators and the ministry; reflexivity and the critical friend reduced but cannot rule out this risk. Eighth, our readings draw on sensitising concepts and on our positions as people who live in the region.

Future studies could: (a) compare teachers who stayed with those who left the region or profession, for instance by sampling from transfer records; (b) follow participants longitudinally; (c) include school leaders and teachers at other levels; (d) combine qualitative and quantitative data, including burnout, compassion satisfaction and posttraumatic growth, to test the moral subsidy proposition, for example whether calling interacts with perceived institutional support in predicting well-being and intention to

leave; and (e) examine institutional data and compare teachers in the earthquake region with teachers elsewhere in Türkiye to separate general from disaster-specific grievances.

7 Conclusion

For the classroom teachers in this study, staying in Kahramanmaraş after the earthquakes was not simple continuity or individual resilience. It was a morally charged and ambivalent undertaking, sustained by relationships with children, colleagues and community as well as by personal convictions, and made more or less bearable by leaders, policy and infrastructure. Their requests show that support cannot be limited to psychological care. Teachers also described a commitment that institutions may take for granted, which we call moral subsidy and offer as a proposition for studies with institutional data and teachers who left. For policy, support in a disaster region should combine psychosocial spaces, flexible and understanding school leadership, and recognition and material return, with attention to how incentives interact with mobility.

Declarations

Author Biographies

Emine Doğan obtained her doctoral degree in the field of educational administration. She works at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University in Turkey. She has national and international articles and presentations in the field of educational administration. Her main areas of research include leadership, school management, data-based decision-making and organizational behavior.

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Ethical approval

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and material

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation, to any qualified researcher.

Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

ED: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

MK: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis.

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Tables

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Code	Gender	Age	Experience (years)	Education	School damage
T1	Female	33	7	Bachelor's	Moderate
T2	Male	42	15	Master's	Moderate
T3	Female	35	8	Bachelor's	Moderate
T4	Female	31	8	Bachelor's	Moderate
T5	Female	38	10	Bachelor's	High
T6	Female	39	9	Bachelor's	Moderate
T7	Male	40	12	Master's	Moderate
T8	Female	34	9	Bachelor's	Moderate
T9	Male	40	15	Bachelor's	High
T10	Female	37	12	Bachelor's	High
T11	Female	32	7	Bachelor's	Low
T12	Female	28	5	Bachelor's	Low

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, main codes and contributing participants

Theme / subtheme	Main codes	Participants
Theme 1. Staying as a morally charged and ambivalent undertaking		
Loyalty, belonging and self-sacrifice	Debt of loyalty and belonging; self-sacrifice and devotion	T2, T4, T5, T8, T11; T2, T3, T5, T11
Fear, loss and necessity	Fear and trauma; loss and sorrow; necessity ("life going on")	T1, T3, T7, T8; T4, T8, T9; T3, T8
Interrupted presence and return	Guilt at leaving; return called for by others' suffering	T6
Theme 2. Relational and moral anchors of staying		
Children: love, care and a widened role	Love for children; empathy and responsibility; psychological support and guidance more prominent; parent or protector; sensitivity to pupils' experiences	T11; T5, T6, T12; T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, T10, T12; T2, T4, T8, T9, T11; T7, T10, T12
Reciprocity	Witnessing recovery; mutual strengthening	T1, T4, T7, T8; T1, T9, T10
Faith, love of the profession and conscientious responsibility	Faith; love of the profession and satisfaction; duty and clear conscience	T3, T5, T7, T8, T10; T1, T5, T11, T12; T2, T6, T12
Civic duty, material and social reasons	Income; respect and affection; service to the state	T2; T8; T4
Theme 3. School and community conditions perceived as easing staying		
Understanding leadership, flexibility and school climate	Humane and understanding administrators; flexibility in time and task; positive climate and belonging	T1, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8, T9, T11, T12; T7, T9, T12; T2, T4, T5
Collegial solidarity and communal unity	Support among colleagues and shared fate; communal unity and outside help	T3, T5, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12; T1, T4, T6, T7, T8
Theme 4. Limited institutional recognition and material return		
Policy discontinuity, infrastructure and the physical environment	Policy discontinuity and curriculum change; physical and infrastructural inadequacy; requests about roads, transport and environment	T1, T2, T9, T10; T7, T9, T11, T12; T5, T7, T8, T11

Theme / subtheme	Main codes	Participants
Professional standing, recognition and material compensation	Problems with employment rights; weakened standing; request for standing and respect; compensation and additional payments; placement flexibility; service points and incentives	T7, T11, T12; T11; T4, T5, T9, T11; T1, T5, T9, T11; T5, T10; T10, T11, T12
Housing and shelter	Housing support valued; housing requested	T1; T5, T10
Theme 5. Shared spaces for sharing and support		
	Social activities and trips; group therapy and spaces for sharing; psychological counselling	T1, T3, T4, T9, T10, T12; T1, T3, T6, T7, T11; T4, T6, T8

Supplementary Files

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