

Keeping Cool

Building Teachers' Resilience



Introduction

Early career teacher attrition is an issue of concern both in Australia and internationally. As a result, governments, employers, policy makers, higher education providers and researchers have sought explanations about why some teachers leave the profession and others stay. Successive international and Australian national reports highlight the fact that anywhere between 25 – 40 % of teachers could leave the profession within the first five years of teaching. This is clearly a major concern for governments, the community and the profession. An acute shortage of primary teachers, for example, represents one of the biggest hurdles to achieving the goal of universal primary education (UPE). As such, policies that effectively address teacher training and retention should be at the core of national education policies (UNESCO, 2011).

A great deal of research has been conducted in an attempt to understand this trend from an attrition perspective. Why do teachers leave? And alternatively, why do some teachers stay? One explanation has been that *resilience* may contribute to teachers' ability to adapt and thrive under challenging working conditions. Other professions such as social work, nursing, mental health, and medicine have looked to *building resilience* to help better prepare individuals for dealing with the challenges of their work in these fields. The teaching profession may also benefit from a focus on *building resilience* at the preservice and early career stages.

To investigate *building teacher resilience*, a team of researchers from Murdoch University (WA), Curtin University (WA) and RWTH Aachen University (Germany) developed the "Keeping Cool: Building teachers' resilience" project. The project was funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council grant from 2009 – 2011. Central to the project were a literature review (Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011) and an extensive annotated bibliography on teacher resilience; longitudinal data collection (surveys and interviews) to explore factors influencing teacher resilience; and development of a website to support resilience in preservice and practicing teachers (www.keepingcool.com.au). Complementing the website, a Facebook page was developed enabling a wider audience to view and interact with online resources. As teacher educators, these aspects of the project also enabled us to investigate how principles of resilience may be embedded in preservice teacher education programmes, both in Australia and more widely.

Aims of this paper

This paper presents the key findings from the Keeping Cool project, describing the characteristics of resilient teachers and exploring how *building resilient teachers* may form part of preservice teacher education programmes.

Teaching in the 21st century – challenges and expectations?

Teachers' work is highly complex, skilled and challenging. And yet it is often lowly paid and undervalued. In recent times the challenges that teachers face have become more complex. Societal changes and policy initiatives have increased the intensity of the profession whilst at the same time reducing teacher autonomy, leading in many cases to demoralisation and high levels of attrition (eg Down, 2009; Hargreaves, 2009).

A review of the empirical literature on teacher resilience revealed an array of challenges faced by contemporary teachers in relation to their work. Many of the challenges that were identified related to the classroom and school context. These include classroom management issues, meeting diverse needs, lack of resources and lack of support from the schools' leadership. Others highlighted broader issues related to the professional context of teachers' work. These challenges included heavy workloads, lack of time, increasing non-teaching duties, additional external regulations, demoralizing policy initiatives, poor hiring practices and uncertain job security (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2010; Day, 2008; Howard, 2004; Jennings, 2009).

Such challenges have led to what can be called adverse working conditions and have contributed to large numbers of early career teachers in many countries leaving the profession. There is, however, also evidence in the literature of teachers, schools and communities resisting such pressures, re-imagining schools and schooling (Smyth & McInerney, 2007), actively seeking challenges (Anderson & Olsen, 2006) and finding challenges "energising and exciting" (Brunetti, 2006, p. 819). Teachers (and their school communities) in these contexts can be seen to be thriving not just surviving, and being resilient.

What does a resilient teacher look like?

Resilient teachers have been described as those who can "rebound from disappointments" and "sustain their commitment to the profession, and with this, their effectiveness" (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 449). Resilient teachers have "the ability to adjust to various situations and increase [their] competence in the face of adverse conditions" (Bobek, 2002, p. 202) and thus are able to overcome challenging situations or recurring setbacks quickly and efficiently (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 449). Resilient teachers do not simply survive, but they maintain job satisfaction and commitment to the profession – they thrive.

As resilience is a "multifaceted phenomenon that comes into existence because of a combination of individual characteristics ... and environmental factors" (Gordon & Coscarelli, 1996, p. 15) it is important to consider both the individual and environmental conditions under which resilience may be supported or challenged. In the context of initial teacher education therefore, understanding the individual characteristics that may help build resilience is important, as is developing preservice teachers' capacity to respond to the challenges of the profession while maintaining their own commitment.

Understanding the particular individual characteristics contributing to teacher resilience has featured in much research over the last 10 years. A range of attributes of resilient teachers have been identified, such as strong intrinsic motivation (Sinclair, 2008),

self-efficacy (Day, 2008), perseverance and persistence (Yost, 2006), optimism (Le Cornu, 2009), sense of humour (Bobek, 2002), emotional intelligence (Chan, 2008), willingness to take risks (Sumsion, 2003) and flexibility (Le Cornu, 2009). Similarly skills of resilient teachers have also been noted, such as problem solving (Castro, Kelly & Shih, 2009), active coping skills (Chan, 2008) and teaching skills (Bobek, 2002). Resilient teachers also have significant supportive relationships in their personal and professional lives (Bobek, 2002; Patterson, Collins & Abbot, 2004). These skills and attributes can act as protective factors which moderate the effects of potential threats to teacher resilience.

What makes a resilient teacher?

"I use the analogy of a branch ... the branch can break with stress, but if a branch is allowed to be exposed to the wind and the seasons it becomes more flexible, it shapes itself accordingly ..."

The 'Keeping Cool' team also investigated the question of 'what makes a resilient teacher?' from the perspective of early career and beginning teachers (Mansfield, Beltman, Price & McConney, 2012). Using survey responses to the question 'what makes a resilient teacher?', aspects of resilience were identified. Rather than developing another 'list' of attributes and skills of resilient teachers, we sought to organise these aspects into broader, higher order dimensions. Although this presented a challenging task given the multi-dimensional nature of resilience, four main dimensions emerged. Aspects of resilience from our data could be related to professional, motivational, emotional and social dimensions as shown in Figure 1.

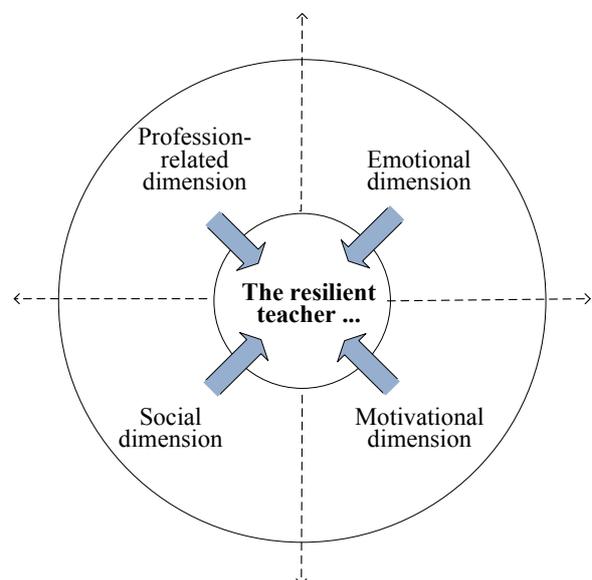


Figure 1: Four dimensions of the resilient teacher

Profession-related dimension

The profession-related dimension involves aspects concerning the practice of teaching, some of which may be traditionally addressed in teacher education programmes. These include use of "effective teaching strategies which actively work" and "the ability to use effective classroom behaviour techniques". Being "a well prepared teacher" and being able to "multitask like a champion" were also noted.

Many teacher education programmes also focus on developing students' reflection skills and these were seen to be important for resilience.

[A resilient teacher] "reflects on what has gone wrong, what is not working well and what is working well, and being able to make changes to the situations for the better of the students and the teacher".

Resilient teachers were perceived as those who "maintain their commitment to their students regardless" and "ensure the children come first". Being flexible and able to "adapt quickly when new situations arise" was also noted as important.

Emotional dimension

Resilient teachers were described as those who "love the job" and are able to "bounce back" after facing challenges. They are "thick skinned", don't "take things personally" and "stay calm in the thick of it".

"A resilient teacher is one who doesn't sweat the small stuff. You have to be able to rise above the feelings of inadequacy and believe in yourself."

They also "cope with the demands associated with teaching" and know how to manage stress. Managing the challenges of teaching also included maintaining a suitable work/life balance.

A resilient teacher can "keep their sense of humour and enjoy the job!" and "laugh about the bad/stressful events that occur and does her best to start each day with a happy attitude".

Motivational dimension

Resilient teachers were seen to be motivated teachers able to "maintain a high level of motivation and enthusiasm for the job despite its difficulties" and "enjoy challenges within their teaching profession". They "work hard to maintain a positive outlook on their work and leave school thinking about the highs rather than the lows". Resilient teachers are also persistent.

Resilient teachers "persist and persevere through problems or situations", and are "unrelenting when overcoming challenges within the classroom/school". They "have realistic expectations of themselves and others" and "do not give up improving themselves and their practice".

Also related to motivation were perceptions of resilient teachers being efficacious. They are "confident in their own abilities and knowledge" and "believe in themselves as a professional". This self-efficacy is strongly related to a positive experience of teachers' preparation at University.

Social dimension

Our participants also described social dimensions of being a resilient teacher. For instance, help seeking and taking advice were important.

[A resilient teacher] "is someone who is willing to talk to others and ask the stupid questions" and "recognises when to ask for help and that it is okay to need help and assistance".

Resilient teachers have "solid and honest relationships with colleagues" and are able to "talk about feelings/stresses, etc". Support networks and the role they can play in problem solving was also noted - "needs to have a great support network (other teachers, collegiate support person, etc) to discuss issues, problems, concerns, stresses".

Multiple dimensions of resilience

It is important to note however, that resilient teachers were not described in terms of a single dimension. Rather, resilient teachers were perceived to demonstrate a range of dispositions and skills, related to all four dimensions.

A resilient teacher is someone who:

- *Has effective time management and organisational skills.*
- *Ensures a balance between work and leisure.*
- *Has a positive attitude, even in times of difficulty.*
- *Has realistic expectations of themselves and others.*
- *Has the ability to "bounce back" when experiencing adversity.*
- *Sense of humour is essential!*
- *Willing to talk to others and ask the stupid questions!!*

This multi-dimensional view of resilience reflects the extant literature and highlights the idea that resilience involves a complex interplay between many capacities, skills and knowledge in the face of adverse conditions.

"I am resilient ... that's why I'm leaving - but I'm still going to be a teacher"

It's important to acknowledge that our position is not that resilient teachers are those remaining in the profession with the view to 'survive'. Moreover, our emphasis is on 'thriving' and the understanding that teacher resilience is evidenced by the ability to adapt despite challenging circumstances *and* sustain enthusiasm and commitment. This allows the possibility that the decision to leave a teaching situation due to ongoing challenges and pressures may not necessarily reflect lack of resilience. Moreover, a resilient teacher may recognise that the actions required to 'adapt' to a challenging circumstance may reduce their enthusiasm and commitment to the profession. Moving to another teaching context may provide new opportunities to realise professional goals.

Contexts to support teacher resilience?

Both the literature reviewed and our data point to contexts as providing possible supports and/or challenges to teacher resilience. During their professional lives teachers work with students in the immediate classroom context and also interact with colleagues, school administrative staff, parents and the broader community. Similarly individuals live within contexts outside professional life, including others such as family and friends. These multiple contexts can offer supports or challenges for the development of resilience.

These contexts, discussed in more detail below also play a role in developing 'the resilient teacher' as shown in Figure 2.

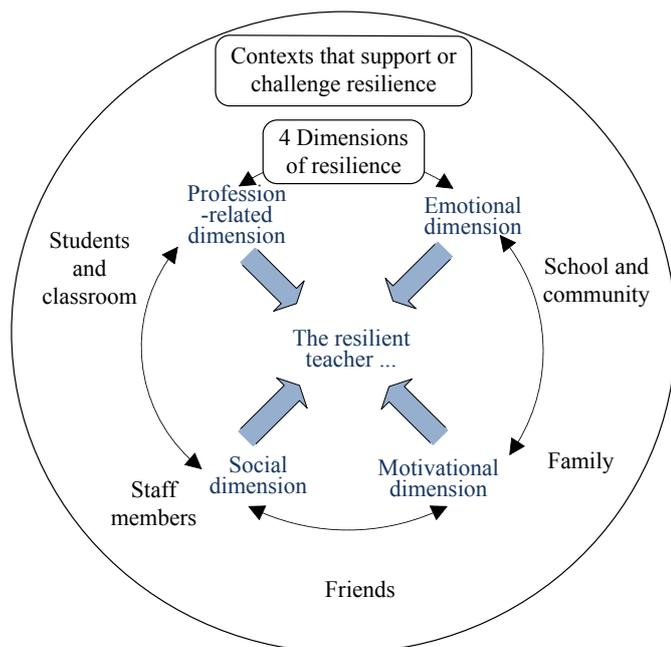


Figure 2: Contexts supporting the resilient teacher

Family and friends

In a large UK study of teachers' working lives, personal support from family was the most common factor affecting teachers with a positive sense of agency, resilience and commitment (Day, 2008). In another study, interviews with experienced, resilient teachers revealed that all had strong support groups that included a diverse network of caring friends and family – not necessarily connected with teaching (Howard & Johnson, 2004). How best to harness this support and understand the role it may play in development of teacher resilience remains a challenge.

"it's very good to have a family that understands what the job is about"

"my husband's allowed his employment to take a back seat to sort of, has taken a huge role in the house, domestically and so-on, and just laughs and says to me, 'I'll see you next year!'"

School contexts

Providing reasonable teaching assignments in their area of expertise and avoiding last minute hiring are potential ways to improve the retention of novice teachers (Tait, 2008). Authors who have examined teacher resilience have suggested that induction, while including practical advice and socialisation into the role of a teacher, should also include opportunities for reflection on new teachers' own practice and the values of the educational settings in which they work (Flores, 2006). Many new teachers work in relief or casual positions and may need special consideration (Jenkins, Smith & Maxwell, 2009; McCormack & Thomas, 2005).

Formal mentor programs can be especially valuable if the mentor is positive and professional (Olsen & Anderson, 2007), from the same teaching area (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), and graduates have some say in their selection. Mentor programs must be well-designed and well-funded and benefits for new teachers include increased retention rates (McConney & Maor, 2009), enhanced self-reflection and problem-solving abilities, higher levels of self-esteem, positive attitude and confidence, and reduced feelings of isolation and of the possible stigma associated with asking for help (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009).

"[mentors] just need to be friendly, but at the same time they need to be critical, they need to offer that advice but not you know in a nasty way, in a kind way"

New teachers appear to be more strongly influenced by contextual factors than their more experienced colleagues, and it is important to ensure that their classroom experiences are successful, that they have sufficient resources, and are provided with supportive feedback (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).

School environments that are positive, participatory and collegial are needed, not just for novice teachers as all may benefit from this. For example, formal and informal staff interaction may occur through activities such as birthday celebrations and social outings (Jarzabkowski, 2002). Teacher resilience research indicates that work colleagues are an important source of hope and inspiration, assisting educators to cope with work difficulties and sustain their commitment, particularly in very challenging situations (Anderson & Olsen, 2006). Colleagues can boost morale (Howard & Johnson, 2004), and a positive outlook can be contagious (Jarzabkowski, 2002). It is recognised that school leaders may need professional leadership training on how to create a collaborative school culture (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009).

[other teachers] "they're just there for you and you know that if you're having a rubbish day someone will give you a smile or you do feel very much part of a community rather than isolated, and that is a big factor I feel"

"I can go to any one of the staff and have a whinge or run something by them and say, 'what would you do in the situation?'"

Role of the students in the school context:

School students themselves, while often providing challenges for teachers, can also provide supports for teacher resilience. For example one US study found that resilient inner city teachers have a deep respect for the way their students dealt with and overcame difficult circumstances and feel a powerful responsibility and commitment to them (Brunetti 2006). Positive student-teacher relationships have been shown to sustain teachers in Ireland in the face of challenges (Kitching, Morgan & O'Leary, 2009).

"There are days when I think 'oh, I could just go and work in an office and earn more money and have less stress' [laughs] but then there's days when I think, 'gee I'm lucky.' So it's those days that you hang on to and get you through ... every job has its ups and downs but I just find it so rewarding."

Building teacher resilience: The role of preservice programs

Both the literature and our findings indicate that 'resilience' is important to enable teachers to thrive and maintain their commitment to the profession, especially in adverse or challenging circumstances. Both individual factors and contexts provide supports and challenges to resilience. If resilience is to be a helpful characteristic of teachers, then how can resilience be developed in teacher preparation programs?

Little research regarding the role of preservice programs in the development of teacher resilience was located in the literature. Some studies have examined strategies implemented to assist with retention and teacher development, but there seems to be a lack of intervention studies, particularly in relation to developing personal characteristics such as motivation and self-efficacy that have been found to be important in enhancing resilience. Some implications, however, may be drawn from current research.

Peers from a preservice course can provide informal support for new teachers if networks are developed and maintained (Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Freedman & Appleman, 2008; McCormack & Thomas, 2005). Many authors writing about teacher resilience offer recommendations for preservice programmes, such as building a climate of resilience at university (Yates, Pelphrey and Smith, 2008). Specific suggestions include:

- Preparing preservice teachers to create their own support networks in the early years of teaching (Woolfolk Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005);
- Providing opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss their beliefs and values about teaching and learning (Flores, 2006);
- Teaching specific personal skills such as stress management, coping, social skills, assertiveness, self-regulation and empathy (Chan, 2008; Tait, 2008).

"...there's an incredible strong group of us from Uni, who - I'm one of 6 girls who we regularly talk to each other or catch up or -, so they're mentors to me in the sense that we can talk about things, because we seem to be at a similar emotional phase of our development"

In general, more substantial links between preparation programmes, employing authorities and individual schools are recommended in the literature, so that new teachers are able to access support from a variety of sources according to their needs.

Questions for teacher educators to ask

While there is no 'one size fits all' approach to resilience building, the following questions may provide some useful reflection points for teacher educators and schools of education more broadly.

Do we ... embed aspects of resilience in our units? For example,

- Provide opportunities for development of skills associated with resilience (eg problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiation, coping skills, emotional management skills, dealing with parents, etc).
- Provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own personal development, self-efficacy, motivation and preparation for the profession.
- Empower preservice teachers to act in ways that promote resilience (eg building your own support network) and accessing other available support through employers and professional networks.
- Provide learning environments in which a culture of help-seeking is not perceived as a weakness.
- Develop tasks in which students experience competence and develop self-efficacy.
- Provide opportunities in which students have to be self-directed and solve problems.
- Explicitly examine what builds resilience in young people and teachers.
- Provide learning environments in which students have to manage social and emotional stress.
- Provide opportunities in which students can be professionally proactive and take responsibility.

Do we ... support resilience development in professional practicums and beyond?

- Provide practicum opportunities for students to experience a range of teaching contexts (socio-economic, sector, rural / remote, metropolitan).
- Offer opportunities for connecting and reflecting on experiences from practicum, work and personal life to university learning and for dealing with the challenges of the profession.
- Support/continue a relationship with our graduates as they move into the profession.

Concluding thoughts

Resilience, like teachers' work, is complex, multifaceted and dynamic. All key stakeholders involved in preservice teacher education can assist with the development of resilience by first acknowledging that teaching requires much more than technical skills. While pedagogical and subject knowledge are essential elements of successful teaching, there are many other complex professional, social, motivational and emotional aspects to teaching that need to be attended to by teacher educators, schools and school systems. If early career teachers are to thrive and not just survive in the complex and diverse world of schools in the 21st Century then they will benefit from having opportunities to develop resilience.

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Researchers:

Dr Caroline Mansfield, (Project leader), Murdoch University

Dr Anne Price, (Project leader), Murdoch University

Dr Andrew McConney, Murdoch University

Dr Susan Beltman, Curtin University

A/Prof Lina Pelliccione, Curtin University

Prof Marold Wosnitza, RWTH Aachen University, Germany

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