



Resilience strategies for new teachers in high-needs areas

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates strategies of resilience exhibited by fifteen novice teachers employed in high-needs areas, such as in urban and rural contexts and in special education. Findings indicated that teachers utilised a variety of strategies, including help-seeking, problem-solving, managing difficult relationships, and seeking rejuvenation/renewal. These strategies assisted beginning teachers in building additional resources and support; however, the burden for success and securing resources fell on teachers themselves. Furthermore, the researchers recognised that resilient teachers demonstrated agency in the process of overcoming adversity. Implications for future practice and research are discussed.

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A growing teacher shortage, especially in high-needs urban and rural schools and in fields like special education, is becoming a pressing concern for many countries (Gorard, See, Smith, & White, 2007; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; White & Smith, 2005). In fact, a U-shaped pattern of attrition exists, in which new teachers and older teachers leave the profession at faster rates (Guarino et al., 2006; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Researchers allude to a plethora of reasons why new teachers leave the profession, ranging from pursuing another career, seeking higher pay or better benefits, childbearing, lack of authority at school, needing more time for self and family, and feeling dissatisfied with teaching (Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). McCann and Johannessen (2004) discovered that teachers who were likely to leave the profession reported feeling that the workload was unreasonable or unmanageable, that their efforts were futile, that their needs were not being met, or that choosing teaching was a compromise rather than the career of choice. In addition, researchers pinpoint the school context, which may lack resources, professional-development opportunities, parent involvement, and community support systems, as a major culprit in teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Scherff, 2008; Smethem, 2007). Finally, fields like special education assert additional demands and burdens on beginning teachers, ranging

from increased administrative duties to issues of meeting the diverse special needs of students (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

As a way of decreasing the exodus of new teachers from the profession, many scholars advocate reducing school-based stressors and incorporating mentoring and induction programmes. Darling-Hammond (2003) persuaded school leaders to make an investment in competitive salaries, provide adequate resources, hire qualified teachers, and incorporate a solid mentoring programme. Likewise, Colgan (2004) urged school administrators to “listen” to teachers, who reported needing an accessible mentor, collaboration with faculty, support with discipline issues, and an encouraging Principal (Head of School). McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) stressed the importance of assigning teachers appropriate teaching assignments, offering a comprehensive induction process, facilitating collegial networking and supportive evaluation, and preparing novice teachers for the challenges that they might face by discussing common issues encountered by new teachers.

These strategies attempt to either alter negative working conditions or to provide additional resources for beginning teachers. However, Williams (2003) observed that “many teachers are affected by the same conditions that contribute to their colleagues leaving the profession but chose to stay” (p. 74). These teachers exhibit qualities of resilience. Broadly defined, resilience refers to the “ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one’s competence in the face of adverse conditions” (Bobek, 2002, p. 202). While the teacher education literature has addressed ways to improve the school context for beginning teachers, few researchers have explored how

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teachers employ resilience strategies in challenging contexts. Furthermore, the literature fails to investigate the subtleties of teacher resilience in hard-to-staff urban and rural schools and in the field of special education, specifically for first-year teachers. The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative study of fifteen beginning teachers who taught in high-needs areas and who practised resilience strategies when dealing with the many problems they confronted during their first year of teaching. Here, we illuminate the adaptive process these beginning teachers undertook to overcome adversity and to sustain their commitments to teaching.

1. Teacher resilience and agency

Gu and Day (2007) discussed two trends in defining resilience. First, resilience as a psychological construct incorporates the study of personal factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, resourcefulness, and health, which are believed to assist individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity. This approach seeks to identify attributes which describe a resilient person. The second approach views resilience as a multidimensional and complex process, “a dynamic within a social system of interrelationships” (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305). These relationships include a series of protective factors, or buffers, that minimise the impact of an adverse situation or event (Kumpfer, 1999). Protective factors incorporate not only personal factors, but also external support systems, such as friends and community resources. In addition to protective factors, resilience in this second approach is oftentimes viewed as a process by which individuals negotiate and overcome challenges in the normal process of living (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990).

We have found only a handful of studies that explore teacher resilience, most of which emphasises the role of protective factors, identifying either personal attributes or environmental conditions of resilient teachers. In a qualitative study of ten inner-city teachers, Stanford (2001) concluded that resilient teachers derived deep personal satisfaction in their work and relied on an extensive network of support involving teacher colleagues, family and friends, and church groups. Likewise, Williams (2003) found that the twelve experienced teachers in her study drew strength from their joy of teaching and also sought to improve themselves through professional development. Brunetti (2006) described the personal qualities of experienced inner-city teachers, acknowledging the “heart” of these teachers that enabled them to want to teach underprivileged students and work towards social justice. Finally, based on a study of 300 experienced teachers in England, Gu and Day (2007) identified three scenarios that describe how teachers balanced their personal identities, school situations, and professional values and beliefs throughout their teaching career. In the first scenario the resilient teacher sought balance among these three components; whereas, in the other two scenarios one or more of these components either became dominant or teachers could not manage any of these areas. Gu and Day (2007) offered three stories that illustrate the interconnected role of both personal and environmental factors on the resilience of experienced teachers.

These recent studies on resilience highlight the importance of protective factors that help to buffer the effects of adversity; however, more attention must be given to the process of overcoming adversity. Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) defined resilience as “using energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adverse conditions [emphasis in original]” (p. 3). In their study of eight experienced teachers, they identified strengths and strategies that teachers rely on in the face of adversity, including decision-making, seeking professional development, problem-solving, relying on friends and colleagues, and being flexible. Here the focus shifts from attributes and environmental conditions to actual strategies that experienced teachers employ when confronting challenges. This

shift illuminates how resilience occurs as a process of adaptation. A central component here, productive energy, implies that teachers exhibit agency in overcoming adversity. By agency, we share Lasky's (2005) view that agency “starts with the belief that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are also shaped by social and individual factors” (p. 900). Hence, the strategy orientation of Patterson et al. (2004) suggests the importance of agency on the part of the teacher. Unfortunately, we have found no other studies on teacher resilience that explored strategies of resilience and agency. Furthermore, researchers have yet to study how beginning teachers utilise strategies of resilience and act as agents to overcome conditions of adversity.

As part of this study, we assert a belief that resilience is a process which occurs throughout the normal lifespan of a person (Richardson et al., 1990; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995). Our view of resilience as a process relies on a model of resilience in which individuals employ specific strategies when they experience disruption and anxiety as a result of an adverse situation (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Richardson et al., 1990). These resilience strategies allow a person to overcome the adversity and gain new insights which minimise the impact of that adversity for future encounters. Our position on resilience borrows from both the multidimensional approach described by Gu and Day (2007) and the strategy orientation of Patterson et al. (2004). This approach to resilience offers several advantages for teacher educators, school administrators, and teacher mentors. First, we see teachers as active agents, adopting various strategies to find balance and achievement in the face of adversity, often caused by minimal resources and challenging working conditions. Second, identifying resilience as a process suggests that all teachers practice a variety of resilience strategies. Thus, our focus here centres not on key attributes of the teacher or resources in the environment, but on strategies teachers employ. These strategies may inform ways in which teacher educators and mentors support novice teachers. Finally, our position on resilience enables us to identify strategies of resilience found in the struggles and accomplishments of beginning teachers, not just experienced teachers.

In this study, we sought to describe resilience strategies employed by first-year teachers in high-needs areas. We investigated the following research questions:

- What strategies do new teachers employ in response to adverse situations?
- What resources do beginning teachers rely on to overcome challenges and obstacles to teaching?

These questions delve into an area not pursued in the literature on teacher resilience and new teacher retention.

2. Contexts of the study

Participants for this qualitative, interpretative study included fifteen first-year teachers in various high-needs areas who were interviewed between May and September of 2007. Participants included five rural teachers, five urban teachers, and five special education teachers. The five rural teachers taught in a hard-to-staff rural community, consisting of a low-income and culturally diverse population. These rural teachers were recruited in April and May through e-mail with the support of local school officials. These teachers were interviewed in May and June. The five urban teachers were recruited with the support of a large urban school district and were contacted by e-mail in August at the end of their first year of teaching. Interviews with urban teachers were conducted in summer after their first year of teaching or early into their second year, between August and September. Finally, the five special education teachers were recruited through their affiliation with a large research university

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