Building resilience in pre-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role that professional experiences (practicum) can play in building resilience in pre-service teachers. In particular it focuses on a learning communities model of professional experience with its emphasis on relationships and its attention to the complex and dynamic interactions between individuals and their 'student teaching' contexts. This article draws on a number of studies including evaluations of two cohorts of graduate Bachelor of Education (primary) students and a self-study based on the work of two university academics. Jordan's [2006. Relational resilience in girls. In S. Goldstein, & R. Brooks, (Eds.), *Handbook of resilience in children*. New York: Springer] model of relational resilience – with its characteristics of mutuality, empowerment and the development of courage – is used as a conceptual framework for illuminating some of the emerging insights from our work with the Learning Communities model.

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1. Introduction

The notion of resilience in teachers is gaining increasing currency in the literature. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) define resilience as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (p. 425). One of the main reasons for the increased attention to teacher resilience is the considerable attention paid in recent years to the high proportion of teachers who leave the profession in the first five years. It has been established that in the western world, nearly one third resign or burn out during this time (see for example DETE, 2005; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Ramsay, 2000). In Australia and overseas there is widespread interest in retention of early career teachers (see for example Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Keough, 2007; Martinez, 2004) and many studies have been conducted around the induction and experiences of teachers in the first to third years of teaching (see for example Britton, Paine, Pimm, & Raizen, 2003; Intrator, 2006; McCormack & Thomas, 2003; Tait, 2005). Early career teachers who cope well are seen to have a 'resilience factor' (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Peters & Le Cornu, 2007) which enables them to create their own support networks and learning experiences and to persevere when confronted with the many contradictions and dilemmas they encounter in their first years of teaching (McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2006). Tait (2005, p. 12)

concluded that "resilience is probably one of the most important strengths for novice teachers."

Other writers in the field have argued that resilience is not only important for novice teachers but for all teachers as it can enhance teaching effectiveness, heighten career satisfaction and better prepare teachers to adjust to education's ever-changing conditions (Bobek, 2002; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Another reason given is related to teachers being role models for their students. Gu and Day (2007) cited the work of Henderson and Milstein (2003) who made the point that "it is unrealistic to expect pupils to be resilient if their teachers…do not demonstrate resilient qualities". The focus on teacher resilience comes at a time when the emotional dimension of teaching has gained increasing recognition (Hargreaves, 1998; Zembylas, 2003) and the impact of work reforms and the continuing and continual need for change impacts on teachers' abilities to cope.

That there is a need for resilient teachers in this current climate is not in contention. This paper focuses on the role that initial teacher education can play in developing resilience in prospective teachers. In particular it focuses on the role that professional experiences can play. This article uses Jordan's (2006) model of *relational resilience* to illuminate how a newly developed model of professional experience – that of *learning communities*, can contribute to the development of resilience in pre-service teachers. It will be argued that Jordan's key concepts of mutual empathy, empowerment and the development of courage are integral to the *learning communities* model of professional experience. The first part of the paper provides some background information on changes that have been made towards this new model at the University of South Australia. In the next

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section the model of *relational resilience* is described and its applicability to professional experiences established. Then the key concepts provide the framework for highlighting some of the insights about building resilience and developing learning communities in professional experiences that have emerged through our initial evaluations. The paper concludes with a discussion that highlights the key features of the learning communities model of professional experience that contribute to the development of resilience in pre-service teachers.

2. Background

The *practicum* or *professional experience* in initial teacher education has seen many changes over the decades, including changes in the language used to describe it as well as changes in how it is conceptualized, structured and supervised and corresponding changes to the roles of the various participants (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Dobbins, 1993). Most recently there has been a move towards a *learning communities* view of professional experiences (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). This model is underpinned by a social constructivist view of learning which suggests that learning should be 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of meanings rather than receiving them (Bruner, 1996, p. 84). Such a move fits with the latest trend reported in both the teacher professional development and school reform literatures which is the establishment of professional learning communities that provide a positive and enabling context for in-service teachers' professional growth (McLaughlin, 1997; Peters, 2001). By participating in such communities, teachers provide support and challenge for each other to "learn new practices and to unlearn old assumptions, beliefs and practices" (McLaughlin, 1997, p. 84) and actively shape their own professional growth through reflective participation.

Similarly, when professional experiences are framed around the notion of learning communities, whilst actual structures and practices may vary (see for example, Mule, 2006; Sim, 2006) there is a commitment to encouraging pre-service teacher agency and providing increased opportunities for them to engage with their peers and mentors in more collegial ways. With the focus on collaborative relationships there is also the potential for pre-service teachers to be involved in more team teaching and shared risk taking rather than individual teaching and individual risk taking (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). As Mule (2006) noted, "the notion of a learning community contrasts the 'sink and swim' and 'do it yourself' (Britzman, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1994) view of student teaching in the typical practicum" (p. 216).

In a number of programs and courses in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, attempts are being made to reconceptualise professional experience around the notion of learning communities. To this end, nomenclature has recently changed to embrace the terms pre-service teacher (instead of student teacher), university mentor (instead of university liaison) and professional experience instead of practicum. The terms mentor teacher and site co-ordinator remain the same. This article focuses on the first year of the eighteen month Graduate Bachelor of Education (primary) program which includes two professional experience courses, each having a series of on-campus workshops, an on-line component and a school placement. The first placement involves six individual introductory days preceding a two week block and the second placement has six individual days preceding a four week block. The main structural changes have included the introduction of professional experience course teams, clustering in school sites, a per site model of support and the introduction of Learning Circles. These changes are briefly described next in order for the reader to understand how the notion of learning communities is being implemented.

2.1. Professional experience course teams

Professional experience course teams have been developed where each lecturer is responsible for the teaching, learning and assessment of their workshop group of approximately twenty five students in relation to the on-campus, on-line and in-school components of the course. This enables each lecturer to foster a community atmosphere in the workshops on campus before the students go out into schools. This approach differs markedly from what was done previously where a number of staff would teach the on-campus component of the professional experience courses and then extra sessional staff would be employed to supervise out in schools.

2.2. Clustering in school sites

The notion of community is further developed during the students' time in schools, as they are clustered in school sites, with a minimum of four mentor teachers per site involved. In many of the schools the pre-service teachers are paired as well which often means that there are groups of six to eight pre-service teachers in a school site. Clustering allows for the pre-service teachers to support each other, mentor teachers to support each other and because each lecturer has a smaller group of schools to work with, it enables a stronger relationship to be built between the university and school based teacher educators.

2.3. Site model of support

We have moved to a *per site* model of support to replace the *per student* model, where each visit includes the lecturer spending as much time with the mentors and site co-ordinators as with the pre-service teachers. During each school visit the lecturer conducts a 'learning conversation' with the group of pre-service teachers to enable them to reflect on their learning and also talks with the mentor teachers and co-ordinators. Where it can occur, university staff involve mentor teachers in collaborative learning conversations about the role of being a mentor teacher but this is very contextual as it often depends on whether or not the teachers can be released from their classroom duties.

2.4. Learning Circles

The term Learning Circles is used to describe learning communities of pre-service teachers who are placed together in the same on-campus workshop and in the same school for their placement and who meet regularly throughout the practicum for professional dialogue. Pre-service teachers are informed at the beginning of their professional experience courses that participation in Learning Circles requires a dual commitment from them. It requires them to share their experiences and learning and also to listen actively to their peers and ask enabling questions that will assist their peers to explore on a deeper level their own understandings of what they are learning.

3. Relational resilience and its applicability to professional experience

Jordan's (2006) model of relational resilience has its theoretical underpinnings in relational–cultural theory (RCT) which has as its core the belief that all psychological growth occurs in relationships. Miller's (1976) groundbreaking work in RCT challenged the basic assumptions of traditional theories of human behaviour with their focus on individuals and self-development. RCT suggests that resilience resides not in the individual but in the capacity for connection. Jordan criticises developmental models of resilience