Teacher resilience and meaning transformation: How teachers reappraise situations of adversity

CrossMark

Marc Clarà

University of Lleida, Avinguda de l'Estudi General, 4, 25001 Lleida, Spain

HIGHLIGHTS

- Focuses on resilience processes in which teachers' well-being and commitment are restored.
- Analyzes how the meaning of appraisals is transformed in teacher resilience processes.
- Offers two case studies, analyzing appraisals at three levels of depth.
- Reappraisal involves the transformation of the deep level of meaning.
- Reappraisal seeks to eliminate contradictions at the intermediate level of meaning.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

It is commonly assumed that how teachers appraise adverse situations plays a crucial role in their emotional states. This paper explores how situations of adversity are reappraised by teachers in ways that allow them to transit from states of suffering and despair to states of restored well-being and commitment. Focusing on two cases of teacher resilience, this study analyzes the transformation of teachers' appraisals at three levels of depth. The results suggest that reappraisals involve important transformations at the deepest level of the appraisal but are driven by the desire to eliminate contradictions at the intermediate level.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the notion of teacher resilience has attracted increasing attention in the research on teaching and teacher education, mainly in connection with the important problem of the high rates of attrition among teachers (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Johnson & Brown, 2013). It has been argued that an important factor explaining the high rate of attrition among teachers is dissatisfaction and burn-out due to difficult work conditions, including pupils' behavioral problems, fast-paced, continuous changes in the education system, and high accountability pressure (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). With the notion of teacher resilience, many authors have found a way to study not those teachers who leave the profession, but those who, despite the difficult work conditions, stay with commitment and emotional and psychological equilibrium and well-being (Bobek, 2002; Brunetti, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2014; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016).

Thus, although there is some debate regarding the exact meaning of the term teacher resilience, there is a broad consensus among authors that *teacher resilience happens when a teacher adapts positively to an adverse situation*. The debate regarding different approaches basically turns on what exactly should be called teacher resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Ebersöhn, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2016). However, in my reading of the different approaches, this debate is more an issue of different research foci than a real debate about the meaning of teacher resilience. Thus, some studies have focused on resilience as the *outcome* of the positive adaptation and have highlighted important issues such as teacher effectiveness, quality retention in teachers, or teachers' professional growth

(Ebersöhn, 2014; Gu & Day, 2007; Gu & Li, 2013). Other studies have focused more on teachers' *abilities and characteristics*, such as optimism, problem-solving and reflection skills, or attribution and self-efficacy beliefs (Gibbs & Miller, 2014; Hong, 2012; Leroux & Theoret, 2014), which allow the teacher to adapt positively to adverse situations. Finally, several studies have focused more on the *work* teachers do to positively adapt to adverse situations (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010; Jiang, Vauras, Volet, & Wang, 2016; Mansfield, Beltman, & Price, 2014). With all three foci, it has been observed that social networks and social interaction greatly contribute to fostering and supporting teacher resilience (in all three senses of the term) (Beltman, Mansfield, & Harris, 2015; Doney, 2013; Gu, 2014; Papatrianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Schelvis, Zwetsloot, Bos, & Wiezer, 2014). In my view, the three foci are largely complementary, informing different aspects of the phenomenon of resilience understood as the process taken as a whole.

In this paper, I will be using the term "teacher resilience" in the third sense and, thus, will focus on the work teachers do to positively adapt to adverse situations. Research in this area usually considers two main types of work, often based on the proposals of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). On the one hand, there is what could be called *existential work*, that is, the objective modification of the adverse situation; this kind of work is often referred to as "problem-focused coping." On the other hand, there is a type of work that could be called *experiencing*, that is, the transformation or modification of the ways in which one sees and experiences the adverse situation[1]; this kind of work is often referred to as "emotion-focused coping."[2] Among those who study teachers' work on *experiencing* in resilience processes, there are two main approaches: studies that focus on the direct modification of the teacher's somatic-emotional experience (Goetz et al., 2013; Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013; Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, & Frank, 2016) and studies that focus on the modification of the meanings that mediate teachers' emotions. These meanings are usually called *appraisals*, and the process of their modification or transformation is often referred to as *reappraisal*. This paper deals with this latter type of process.

The notion of *appraisal* was coined by Arnold (1960) and substantially developed and disseminated by Lazarus (2006). In Lazarus's words:

> Appraising makes it possible to construct relational meanings, which refer to the significance for the individual of what is happening in the person-environment relationship, the most important aspect of which is interpersonal. It is this kind of meaning that determines which emotions are experienced and/or displayed in any encounter with others.
>
> (Lazarus, 2006, p. 12)

---

[1] According to Vasilyuk (1988), experiencing is the type of work that a person undergoing emotional suffering does to regain emotional equilibrium when faced with a situation she cannot existentially modify (a situation of impossibility). For example, when a loved one dies, there is no way to modify the existential aspects of the situation, no way to bring that person back to life. Thus, the only type of work the sufferer can do with regard to this adverse situation is work to transform the way she sees and feels it. This work is called experiencing. The extent to which a situation is one of impossibility depends on whether the person sees the situation as impossible or not. A situation may be unsolvable from an external point of view, and yet, if the person sees the situation as existentially solvable, it will not be a situation of impossibility for her. Conversely, a situation may have an easy existential solution from an external point of view; however, if the person sees it as unsolvable, it will be a situation of impossibility for her (see also Clarà, 2016).

[2] "Problem-focused coping" and "emotion-focused coping" are the terms used by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to refer, respectively, to processes of coping consisting of existentially modifying the adverse situation and to processes of coping consisting of modifying the way the adverse situation is seen and felt.

Although there is no agreement in the literature regarding exactly how appraisal influences emotion, there is a broad consensus on the importance of this type of meaning and its key role in human emotions (Barrett, 2006; Clarà, 2015a; Izard, 2007; Lazarus, 2006; Moors, 2009; Valsiner, 2001). In research on teacher resilience and teacher emotions, appraisal and coping have mostly been studied in the terms established by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), mainly by using questionnaire-like instruments with large samples (Chan, 2006; Chang, 2009, 2013; Foley & Murphy, 2015; Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Wang, 2009; McCarthy, Lambert, Lineback, Fitchett, & Baddouh, 2015; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). This type of approach obviously has undeniable strengths, but Lazarus (2006, p. 20–22) himself, in a posthumously published paper, warned against narrow adherence to the proposals he had published twenty years earlier and emphasized that the crucial issue is the detailed understanding of the meaning of appraisals. In this regard, although some studies on teacher emotion and resilience have been conducted with a qualitative and nuanced focus on the meaning of appraisal (Dinham, Chalk, Beltman, Glass, & Nguyen, 2016; Farouk, 2010; Taylor, 2013; Van Veen, Sleegers, & Van de Veen, 2005; Yoo, 2011), it has been argued that such approaches are still incidental and that more effort is needed in this direction (Farouk, 2010; Johnson & Brown, 2013; Uitto, Jokikokka, & Estola, 2015).

2. This study

2.1. Focus

Recently, many approaches have focused on a type of resilience phenomenon that Day and Gu (2014) have called "everyday resilience" (Castro et al., 2010; Doney, 2013; Ebersöhn, 2014; Gu & Day, 2013; Hong, 2012; Le Cornu, 2009; Mansfield et al., 2014). In my understanding, these approaches share two key characteristics. First, they assume that teacher resilience does not primarily occur as a reaction to a single defined, specific, isolated, and highly traumatic event, but rather that the adverse situation in teacher resilience most often takes the form of continuous and cumulative difficulties. Second, everyday resilience refers to resilience phenomena in which the emphasis is put on *sustaining* or *maintaining* well-being, commitment, and efficacy despite facing the continuous and cumulative difficulties of which the adverse situation consists. In other words, these approaches are mainly interested in teacher resilience processes in which teachers begin with an initial state of psychological well-being and commitment, are faced with an adverse situation, and manage to *maintain* their well-being and commitment despite this adversity.

This study assumes the first claim defended by these approaches; that is, that in teacher resilience, the adverse situation does not usually consists of a single traumatic event, but rather an accumulation of everyday difficulties. However, while recognizing the high value of studying resilience processes in which psychological well-being is sustained, this study focuses on another type of resilience process, namely those in which psychological well-being and equilibrium are *restored* or *recovered*. Metaphorically speaking, it could be said that approaches to everyday resilience focus on how a runner overcomes the different obstacles she encounters on the road without falling down, while this study is concerned with how runners who fall down get back up and continue their run.

Thus, this study is interested in resilience processes in which the teachers' initial state is one of psychological and emotional suffering and distress caused by an adverse situation, but in which they nevertheless manage to turn this initial state into one of