



Exploring how arts-based reflection can support teachers' resilience and well-being



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Art-based reflection helps to tap into the affect of teaching.
- Deeper reflection allows personal resources to be actioned in response to emotional events.
- Deeper reflection helps teachers to reimagine their future work.

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ABSTRACT

Teaching is a complex profession, and it can have a significant impact on teachers' wellbeing. Awareness of personal and contextual factors that support resilience can help to improve teachers' wellbeing and counter burnout. Three case studies are presented to illustrate how arts-based reflection helped the participants to identify and express their thoughts, feelings and actions within their complex work space. A range of arts-based reflective practices, helped to elicit participants' awareness of the personal and contextual resources that supported their resilience and wellbeing. Such practices enabled them to reimagine their roles by identifying personal, strategic and contextual resources that could support and protect their resilience and wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a complex profession that is constantly undergoing constant change (Fullan, 2016), and teachers require a particular set of skills to reflect on, and respond to the changing landscapes within this complex space. Evidence suggests that teaching is often characterised by high levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Vesely, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2014). Furthermore, teachers are currently under increasing pressure in an era of accountability. Processes that are favoured to define or rate the performance of students and their teachers are usually in the form of quantitative measures (Comber, 2013; Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012). Consequently, high-stakes testing simultaneously drives and limits teachers' work (Zhao, 2012). Keddie (2015) notes that teacher professional judgement is often disregarded. Mockler

and Groundwater-Smith (2017) suggest that in the current era, it is the ease with which something can be measured that often determines its value in education. Concerns have been raised about the toll this situation is reportedly taking on teachers in relation to their resilience and wellbeing (Clarà, 2017; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016).

The status of teaching, the decreasing applications for teacher education university places and the choice of many to leave the profession are areas of concern for governments, educational institutions and educational researchers (Richardson & Watt, 2016). In Australia, a Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) indicated a need to improve the quality and standing of teaching as a profession as a means of countering the declining interest in university placements within teacher education (Craven et al., 2015). Furthermore, teachers' autonomy in relation to pedagogical and curriculum decisions has been reduced due to the influence of accountability measures. Conklin (2014) suggests that one important consequence of this is a diminished sense of joy and wonder felt by teachers about learning and teaching.

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Literature in teacher education reveals a range of circumstances that contribute to teachers' decisions to leave teaching either early in their careers or before retirement. These factors include unreasonable workloads and work conditions (Struyven & Vanthounout, 2014), a sense of isolation (Robertson, 2017), decreasing levels of autonomy and self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, 2017) and high levels of emotional energy due to constantly dealing with challenging behaviours (Chang & Davis, 2009). Hong's (2010) mixed methods study in the United States and Goddard and Goddard's (2006) Australian study of teacher retention both reported a high correlation between emotional burn out and the decision to exit teaching.

Burnout is a state of feeling physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. It is a result of ongoing, excessive stress (Lantieri, Kyse, Harnett, & Malkmus, 2016). Exhaustion and depersonalisation – a sense of detachment from the job – have been found to be core elements of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Furthermore, emotional dissonance – that is, disparity between the feeling being experienced and the masked suppression of public emotions – is a predictor of emotional exhaustion (Chang, 2009). As a result, teachers who are working in challenging contexts may feel the drain of constantly engaging emotional labour (Yin, Huang, & Lee, 2017), during work-related interactions.

Emotional labour encompasses feelings and emotions expected in a given context that are perhaps communicated through unwritten rules and ideological reasoning (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). For example, the perception that good teachers do not get angry may mean that the teacher suppresses feelings when challenged by students' unruly behaviour (Chang, 2009). Similarly, as teaching becomes more prescriptive teachers may not feel supported by administration or agree with directives about their work. If employed in a position of relatively limited power they may feel obliged to accept certain difficult conditions. The masks that teachers wear requires considerable emotional labour which elevates stress and can lead to job dissatisfaction; this in turn contributes to teacher attrition rates (Vesely et al., 2014). Moffatt, Ryan and Barton (2016) suggests that there is a need for self-care practices to build resilience and wellbeing in contexts such as teaching. Reflection is an integral aspect of self-care practices.

Supporting teachers to be reflective practitioners as a means of coping allows them to recognise and respond to the contextual and personal factors influencing their experience as teachers. Coping involves being able to identify, name and respond to feelings in a manner that enhances the positive feelings being experienced or allows negative feelings to be tamed (Chang, 2009). Teacher education programs promote reflection as a way to improve professional practice. However, beyond considering the technical processes of teaching, reflection can lead to greater self-awareness and self-regulation. Consequently, reflection plays a vital role in building teachers' wellbeing and resilience and should be nurtured as part of their professional growth and as a means of retaining them in the profession. (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Moffat et al., 2016). In this article, we therefore investigate the following research question:

Can arts-based reflective practices support teacher resilience and wellbeing?

2. Literature review

2.1. Resilience and wellbeing

Resilience is contextually embedded (Beltman, Mansfield, & Harris, 2015). Social, political, structural and personal factors

combine to create a stable or fluctuating environment. In a period of intense change in education, resilience is particularly relevant to teachers. Resilient teachers are agile in their repose to negative or stressful events: they possess personal assets and understand how to utilise environmental factors to counter the challenging effects of their work and workplace (Gibbs & Miller, 2014); they can reinvent or adapt their roles during organisational change. Resilient teachers face adversity but they are able to recover to a similar level of function and capacity. The ability to mitigate negative emotions and sustain positive emotions are qualities of resilient people (Cooper, Flint-Taylor, & Pearn, 2014). The more familiar phrase associated with resilience of being able to “bounce back” is currently keeping company with terms such as “agile”, “flexible” and “robust” within 21st century education literature.

Masten (2011) notes that resilience manifests as a result of complex interactions of factors including those considered biological, personal, temporal and environmental. The interrelationship between and among these factors can provide a buffer or protective element against experiences with adverse consequences. In this article, we take an ecological view of resilience within a school setting and consider the independent and interconnected influence of the context, staff, families and students, as well as the personal resources of the teachers that support or enhance teacher resilience. From this perspective resilience factors can be described “as a capacity of an individual ... a process where context and the individual interact over time ... and an outcome [where an individual remains motivated to teach] despite facing challenges” (Beltman et al., 2015, p. 173).

Within education, resilience as a capacity, includes a teacher's ability to utilise personal and contextual resources to problem-solve challenges. Some of these resources could be included in what Korthagen (2004) identifies as core qualities such as courage and flexibility. Understanding how personal and contextual resources support capacity is complex with several factors interrelating over time and place as teachers develop and employ a range of strategies such as humour, goal setting, reflection and building networks of support. As a consequence job satisfaction and wellbeing are supported as a result of professional growth, commitment, and job performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000).

Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012, p. 230) describe wellbeing as individuals having “the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge”. From an ecological perspective, wellbeing is supported when an individual has the strategies, such as goal-setting, persistent problem-solving and communication skills, to access and action the personal resources and contextual resources available. Personal resources may include motivation, efficacy, optimism, high expectations and courage. Contextual factors may include trust, collaborative partnerships and networks, strong relationship in the workplace, recognition and autonomy. As described by Mansfield et al. (2016), wellbeing is therefore closely linked to resilience.

2.2. Reflection and reflective practice

Reflection and reflective practice have been noted as crucial skills for teachers in a range of contexts (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Loughran, 2014). Reflection is regarded as critical for ongoing development and self-care, particularly in professions like teaching where change is prevalent. Undertaken on a regular basis, reflective practice provides a protective layer of resilience because it enables a person to grow by considering alternatives to challenging situations or change (Beauchamp, 2015). Without regular opportunities to reflect teachers may be at risk of burnout and disillusionment (Chang, 2009; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011).

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