



# Influences on the capacities for emotional resilience of teachers in schools serving disadvantaged urban communities: Challenges of living on the edge

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Emotional resilience is more important for teachers in schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage than others.
- Resilience is not an innate attribute. It fluctuates according to personal as well as professional circumstances.
- Teachers' capacities for emotional resilience are influenced by combinations of internal, professional and external support.
- Building and sustaining the capacity for resilience is an individual, relational and collective process.
- The emotional support of the head teacher is a key factor.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how teachers in one school in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban setting draw upon their capacities for resilience to maintain a sense of positive professional identity, commitment and moral purpose. It identifies the dynamic influences of individual, school environment, relational, leadership and external personal and policy contexts. The findings show that the capacity for 'emotional resilience' is essential for teachers who constantly "live on the edge," as they seek to manage everyday, intensive pupil motivational and behavioral challenges whilst responding to demands for raising standards of teaching, learning and attainment.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been much emphasis placed by governments on resolving persisting problems of equity and on raising academic standards in schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ladd, 2012). One persistent challenge to achieving these in many countries has been high levels of teacher attrition, particularly among early career teachers and teachers in schools which serve high need communities. Government responses have tended to focus on providing solutions, through, for example, the

development of support systems for early career (e.g. induction, mentoring and coaching schemes) and other teachers (e.g. through career progression points), rather than investigating its root causes. Whilst a plethora of research has focused on understanding why many teachers in the pre and early phases of their careers leave the profession (Flores, 2006; Johnson & Down, 2013; Johnson et al., 2015), much, though not all, of this points to the changes in teachers' working conditions, workload and roles caused by the demands of new public management and policy-led reforms that challenge traditional notions of teacher professionalism (e.g. Troman, 2000, 2008). Other research has focused upon understanding the factors that influence teachers to stay in teaching, identifying the importance of teachers' motivations, positive, stable sense of professional identity, efficacy, job satisfaction, work engagement, commitment and resilience (e.g. Day & Gu, 2009,

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2014; Day & Lee, 2011; Huberman, 1993; Johnson, 2004; Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012; Kirkpatrick & Moore-Johnson, 2014; Papa-traianou & Le Cornu, 2014). However, there is relatively little research that investigates the multiple factors which influence teachers' capacities for resilience in schools that serve high need urban communities and the part that emotions play in ensuring that they are able to teach to their best.

## 2. The challenge of context

This paper reports research that investigated the perceived resilience of all the teachers in one primary school situated in a large public housing estate in a city in the Midlands region of England. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage) in Winterton Primary school (a fictional name), with 229 pupils between the ages of 3 and 11, was more than twice the national average, and the proportion of disabled pupils and those who had special educational needs was above the national average. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups and those who spoke English as an additional language was average. Pupil attendance figures were below average with a few pupils persistently absent. The most recent independent Ofsted inspection report (the independent Office for Standards in Education that judges the quality of schools in England) had rated the school as 'good' in the four main categories of: achievement of pupils; quality of teaching; behaviour and safety of pupils and; leadership and management. Standards of reading by the time the pupils left the school were reported to be below average, although this represented good progress from the 'very low' starting points on entry. The 10 full time teachers, including the new head and recently appointed deputy and a large number of classroom teaching assistants, were reported as taking every opportunity to raise pupils' expectations and build their sense of self worth. The new head teacher (with previous experience of teaching in the school) had been appointed in September, 2013. On examining the pupil progress data carefully, she had found the judgments of the Ofsted inspectors to have been "too generous."

The challenges of working in schools serving low-income urban communities are emotionally intense and complex. Most students in these schools continue to perform less well than others (Strand, 2013; West & Pennell, 2003; Whitty, 2001), the schools they attend tend to attract less well qualified teachers and they suffer from higher than average teacher turnover and attrition (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens, & Volman, 2014; Ingersoll, 2003; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). They face a wide range of challenges (e.g. physical and mental health issues, low student literacy levels on entry, incidents of violence, and unsupportive home environments) which are often associated with students' absenteeism and motivational and behavioral problems (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Harris, 2010). Dorothy, a teacher at Winterton, drew attention to the distinctive challenges that teachers faced in comparison with others who taught in more affluent areas. "There are some teachers that sit very comfortably in the suburbs who would not be at their absolute best because they've not got to manage the challenges in terms of the different behaviours of the children here." Other research has found, also, that the levels of students' social and emotional development is associated, positively and negatively, with student learning and academic performance (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Students' wellbeing and progress and development in schools that serve the most challenging communities are, therefore, likely to be heavily dependent on their teachers' commitment to care for and about them. The resilience challenges for those who work in disadvantaged communities in managing students' challenging behaviors and lack of motivation associated with problems faced in

home environments are likely to be emotionally intense and persistent. In developing caring and trusting relationships with students through creating and sustaining safe learning environments, and in managing students' behavioral challenges teachers, therefore, need to expend high levels of emotional energy. For this, they will need substantial reservoirs of "everyday emotional resilience" (Day & Gu, 2014).

Teachers at Winterton may be described as 'living on the edge', teaching in circumstances that required the effective management of constant emotional, intellectual, personal and professional challenges in order to succeed in engaging students in learning and achievement. This research draws attention to the particular struggles they faced, their exercise of "everyday emotional resilience" (Day & Gu, 2014) as they coped with or managed the emotional as well as intellectual challenges of working everyday with students whose home lives were often fractured, fragmented, unpredictable and emotionally dysfunctional. Whilst this research did not seek to address issues of attrition and retention directly, its findings have implications for understanding why schools in challenging urban communities do or do not retain teachers who are committed, how they might do so, and why supporting teachers' capacities for emotional resilience is a key part of every head-teacher's role.

## 3. Teaching as emotional work: managing the capacity for everyday emotional resilience

There are numerous studies that focus on teaching as emotional work (e.g. Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Sutton, 2004; van Veen & Slegers, 2006), and these suggest that emotions play a key part in processes of building and sustaining resilience. Long ago, Hochschild (1983), in a study which included airline stewards but not teachers, coined the term, "emotional labor." She described the negative effects on workers of the commodification of emotions in work in which the employing organization requires employees to enhance, fake, and/or suppress their public expressions of emotion to achieve success. Whilst this would not apply to the work of teachers directly, since theirs is not a "customer" service relationship but a series of negotiated teacher-student, teaching-learning relationships, there can be little doubt that these demand teachers' emotional as well as intellectual engagement. Engagement itself has been found to, "predict greater motivation...increased productivity...and higher rates of employee retention" (Kirkpatrick & Moore-Johnson, 2014, p. 233). Sustained engagement, by definition, requires authentic caring relationships in which teachers are able to draw upon continuing reserves of emotional energy on a daily basis (Furu, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2011) as they seek to, "understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as part of their own" (England & Farhas, 1986, p. 91). Yet in a small scale study of the positive and negative effects of the emotional labour of caring in enacting teaching in an inclusive classroom, Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 120) found that, whilst care was multi-faceted, mediated by the strength of teachers' vocation and moral purposes, caring relationships could also become, "a source of emotional strain, anxiety, disappointment," and have an impact on teachers' commitment, satisfaction and self-esteem.

Historically, the psychological literature has understood resilience as being the successful adaption to stressors or risk factors (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006; Patterson, 2002; Wright & Masten, 2006). This literature has been challenged as presenting an unduly limited perspective. Positive psychology research has developed the notion of resilience not as a fixed attribute, located in individuals' histories but as dynamic, able to change in relation to environments and associated with notions of 'well-being' and

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