



The Motivation to Teach
A development program for schools



#7 Resilient Teachers



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Resilient Teachers Resilient Schools

The capacity to become resilient comes to many people as they learn to become problem solvers, develop a strong sense of purpose and feel socially competent.

A very strong case is made in learning that teachers need nurturance, just like their students, and they need to feel cared for as teaching is so demanding.

Those who stay in teaching learn to get through tough situations and not take them personally. Those who leave teaching tend to respond more personally to the challenges that the new demands seem to require and it nicks away at their professional sense of self. They become detached from their sense of mission and hence from teaching in general.

Conditions in one's school are critical for teachers. When teachers feel supported and encouraged by their colleagues, and when there are opportunities to work together, teachers gain the resilience they need to continue learning, to stay motivated, and satisfied with their work as teachers.

Leadership is critical to good working conditions as it is principals who can set the climate, encourage community, and invest in teachers as individuals.

We associate resilience with **the persistence of hope and endeavour** among teachers to do their best

to reach and engage every student in learning which will benefit them, regardless of the challenges which this may bring.

The extent to which individual teachers are able to exercise their capacity to be resilient will depend not only upon their individual histories and their inner sense of motivation and commitment, but also upon the influence of the school environment, their colleagues and the quality of their school leadership.

Teaching to their best across a career span of 30 years or more requires that teachers are able to exercise what we call the '**everyday resilience**' that classroom conditions inherently demand. Resilience in this sense is more than the willingness and capacity to bounce back in adverse circumstances.

Rather than continuing to focus upon stress, we believe that we should seek to understand what school leaders, teachers themselves and wellbeing policy can do to build teachers' capacities to be resilient, so that the demands of teaching can be well met and managed and pupils' entitlements to be taught by highly knowledgeable, committed and enthusiastic individuals achieved.

Positive emotions may fuel individual differences in resilience.

Good teaching is charged with positive emotions. It is not just a matter of knowing one's subject, being efficient, having the correct competences, or learning all the right techniques. Good teachers are not just well-oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge and joy.

In a study of high school teachers researchers found that what had kept teachers going in the

profession was emotional factors. We can describe teaching as an intellectual endeavour which involves love, anger and depression, and hope and possibility.

In pursuit of learning in 'communities of practice', teachers will consolidate a sense of belonging and shared responsibility, enhance morale and perceived efficacy, develop aspects of resilient qualities, and thrive and flourish socially and professionally.

There is abundant evidence in the educational literature which shows that in-school management support for teacher learning and development, leadership trust and positive feedback from parents and pupils are key positive influences on teachers' motivation and resilience.

Teacher resilience is also *role specific* in that it is closely associated with the strength and conviction of teachers' vocational commitment; and it is this inner calling to teach and commitment to serve which distinguishes teaching from many other jobs and occupations.

In his research on teachers Brunetti defined teacher resilience as 'a quality that enables teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching and teaching practices despite challenging conditions and recurring setbacks.'

Research has also consistently found that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as to whether they have the capacity to effectively help children learn and achieve are among the most important factors influencing teachers' resilient qualities.

In this sense, resilient teachers are not survivors in the profession, because they 'do more than merely get through difficult emotional experiences, hanging on to inner equilibrium by a thread.' Rather, they display capacity for growth and fulfilment in pursuit of personally and professionally meaningful goals

which, as research on teachers and teaching tells us, 'joins self and subject and students in the fabric of life' and connects their 'intellect and emotion and spirit' in their *hearts*.

It is clear that teachers' ability to be resilient is not primarily associated with the capacity to 'bounce back' or recover from highly traumatic experiences and events but, rather, the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers teach.

Relational resilience

Teachers' worlds are organised around distinct sets of role relationships: 'teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their school principal.'

There is strong and consistent evidence from educational research which suggests that the social organisation of the school – when characterised by supportive, trusting and collegial relationships between different stakeholders – fosters teachers' collective capacity, commitment and effectiveness. AS a school community 'we are wired to connect.'

The presence of support, love, and security fosters resilience in part, by reinforcing people's innate strengths (such as self-efficacy, positive emotions and emotion regulation).

Resilience is not a quality that is innate. Rather, it is a construct that is relative, developmental and dynamic; emphasising the positive adaptation and development of individuals in the presence of challenging circumstances. It is both a product of personal and professional dispositions and values and socially constructed. It encompasses a sense of purpose and entails meaningful actions and participation. The social dimension of teacher resilience recognises the interactive impact of personal, professional and situational factors on teachers' work and lives and contextualises teachers'

endeavours to sustain their professional commitment.

For teachers whose everyday professional worlds are inherently characterised by uncertain and unpredictable circumstances and scenarios, to be able to maintain their commitment to teaching and focus upon high quality teaching practices means more than recovering quickly and efficiently from difficulties. In this 'everyday' sense, resilience is not a rare quality that is reserved for the heroic few.

Over the last decade, although statistics continue to suggest that teaching is one of the most stressful professions in the twenty-first century and that it has experienced relatively higher turnover compared to many other professions, there is also consistent evidence which shows that many teachers in the profession have managed to weather the often unpredictable 'storm' of school and classroom life' and sustain their commitment to make a difference to the learning lives of their students over a professional life span. In this 'over time' sense, resilience is not a quality that is fixed.

Teachers in different phases of their professional lives are likely to face distinctively different influences, tensions, professional and personal concerns.

Although the ways in which they build and sustain their vocation, commitment and resilience are complex and continuous, their capacity to do so may also fluctuate depending upon the effects of a combination of workplace-based and personal influences and also their cognitive and emotional capacities to manage these influences.

Motivational Resilience

This above all: to thine own self be true. William Shakespeare, Hamlet

So, how does a teacher cultivate motivational resilience? As much as possible, engage in autonomy supportive behaviours for oneself. Develop competence, yes, but competence alone will not get you through the rough spots. Research has shown that competence must be combined with a positive affect in order to promote job satisfaction.

If the work environment is not autonomy supportive, discover whether there are ways you can positively influence that environment. Express autonomy support for oneself and others, including colleagues and students. Develop healthy relationships to foster relatedness within the school community. Suggest related topics for professional development in-service activities.

Here are some other research-based aspects of well being to consider:

Authenticity

Richard Ryan has explored a concept that is similar to autonomy, that of authenticity. “Authentic aspects of personality . . . are fully self-endorsed, volitionally enacted, and personally meaningful”. In research studies, increases in authenticity were associated with better mental health and lower perceived stress. Strive for authenticity.

Vitality

Ryan and Deci have conducted research that suggests the support of the basic psychological needs identified by self-determination theory also supports vitality. Not only is this important in work settings, but also in other aspects of life. “The pursuit of meaningful activities, especially those

associated with intrinsic goals, maintains or enhances vitality. These activities can satisfy psychological needs and thus rekindle the energies lost from the more depleting conditions that are so pervasive in many people's daily lives.

Nature

Richard Ryan and his colleagues have also conducted studies that reveal the positive effects of spending time in natural settings. Even images of nature can have a vitalizing effect. If you have control over even a portion of your work environment, this vitalizing effect may be something to keep in mind. Also, these studies reveal that spending even twenty minutes per day outdoors, preferably in a natural environment or one with natural elements, can increase vitality. One's home space may also enhance vitality with the addition of natural elements.

Teachers are faced with great expectations. They typically enter the field for altruistic and intrinsic reasons, motivated by a desire to work with young people and to change the world for the better. But the realities of many school environments tend to undermine these intrinsic motivations while basic psychological needs go unmet. It is no wonder that many countries are facing teacher shortages and the idealistic teachers of yesterday often become the disillusioned career changers of today.

But there is plenty of research that demonstrates ways to change this situation for the better. We can make school environments more autonomy supportive for teachers as well as for students. We can include teachers in the conversation about how to improve not only outcomes but also well-being and vitality at school. We can create an educational culture that values experimentation, genuine collaboration, relevant professional development, and authenticity. The results of such an approach

can benefit not only teachers but also students today, and can affect lasting change in the greater society of tomorrow.

- Many teachers *learn* to have a positive response to adversity.
- Teachers *learn* how to become resilient over time.
- When teachers feel competent and are supported in their workplace, resilience can be built.





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