

Preservice teacher stressors and their reactions to those stressors: Resilient responses

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Introduction

The study reported in this paper explored preservice teachers' perceptions of stressors and ways they mitigated those stressors. Preservice teachers were exposed to the notion of teacher resilience in a compulsory second year subject as a foundation for educating for resilience. This paper explores how preservice teachers engaged with resilience education by learning to recognise the sources of stress that relate to their role as a teacher and developing strategies to manage those stressors as a preservice teacher.

The ability to manage the emotional aspects of teachers work is acknowledged in the literature as an important attribute of teachers who show resilience and successfully cope with the stressful demands of the profession (Howard & Johnson, 2004; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Le Cornu, 2009). The term 'resilience' was originally used by researchers such as Werner and Smith (1987), Masten, Best, & Garmezy (1990) and Benard (1991) to describe children who, despite the risk of adverse circumstances, had survived and thrived. Further research into how teachers responded to stress and adversity (Kyriacou, 2004; Ewing & Manuel, 2005) showed that where they had experienced protective factors, these appeared to have mitigated the adversity. These protective mechanisms could be either internal or external. External factors included the support of colleagues and leadership teams.

The resilience literature names the risk and protective factors for various groups of people (Werner & Smith, 1987; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). Resilience education as this study reports it, names the potential risk and protective factors for teachers. Risk factors include things like workload pressures, lack of pedagogical knowledge, anxiety about relationships with school-based mentors, anxiety about behaviour management etc. By exploring how preservice teachers respond to perceived stressors and challenges they face during their preservice education; it is possible to consider what skills they perceive they need to help them respond to these challenges as practicing teachers. Protective factors for preservice teachers include developing the internal resources to manage the emotional aspects of their work and the external resources like support from family, school-based mentors, and expert pedagogical skills and knowledge. By focusing on resilient responses, the focal point is on resilience as an asset that many preservice teachers have and will take with them into the profession as a strength that will assist them to overcome challenges encountered in their first years of teaching. While there is considerable research into the stressors of experienced teachers, there is little research on

preservice teacher stressors and ways of managing those stressors. The study reported in this paper adds to that body of research.

This paper uses Knight's definition of resilience (2007a, p. 67).

Resilience is seen as an important life-skill that enhances emotional and social wellbeing and enables people to cope with life. It involves the ability to be flexible and adaptive in response to a problem, the ability to 'bounce back' after a negative experience and the ability to empathise with how others feel. It recognises that relationship skills are as important as self-awareness skills. It involves a mindset that sees 'problems' as 'challenges' and a belief in the value of prevention and proactive approaches.

Resilience education and preservice teacher education

Educating preservice teachers about resilience is one way of equipping individuals to manage their own work related stress. It is widely acknowledged that show that teaching is a stressful occupation and that teachers report high levels of work-related stress (Schonfeld, 2001; De Noble & McCormick, 2005; Parker & Martin, 2009). These noted studies cite stressors such as excessive workload, poor relationships with colleagues or students, and poor school climate as antecedents of occupational stress. These studies suggest occupational stress can impact the psychological, physical and behavioural wellbeing of individuals. Occupational stress contributes to high teacher attrition in the first few years of teaching (Berry, 2004; Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Conversely, low levels of occupational stress are correlated with teachers' enhanced job satisfaction and reduced incidence of teacher burnout (DeNoble & McCormick, 2005; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). The assumption is made that if preservice teachers have an awareness of stressors and ways of dealing with them, it may lead to a reduction of stress as a practicing teacher.

Teacher resilience was one of 13 weekly topics studied in a core second year Bachelor of Education subject. In the subject outline, the topic outcomes stated that preservice teachers should be able to:

- describe the stressors that a preservice or novice status can produce for someone entering the teaching profession
- explain why these stressors can occur
- define resilience and be able to describe the factors that can increase one's resilience
- construct or analyse possible teacher responses demonstrating resilience or lack of resilience to school related, potentially adverse scenarios
- construct adverse scenarios and provide illustrations of resilient responses and less resilient responses.

The study & analytical framework

The aim of this study was to explore the following questions: How do preservice teachers respond to challenges they face during their preservice education? What skills do they perceive they need and do they learn during their preservice teacher education to help them respond to these challenges?

The study involved a target population of 135 preservice teachers enrolled in a compulsory semester long second year Bachelor of Education subject. The subject involved professional experience in schools, on-campus tutorials and online engagement. The professional experience component involved attending the same school for half a day each week for 10 weeks. The professional experience aspects included discussion and reflection with practising teachers. Preservice teachers consented to be part of the study prior to the beginning of the term. There were three data sources for this study:

1. A survey that was administered in tutorials mid-way through a 13 week university term and again in the final week of term. The survey was emailed to students who didn't attend the tutorial;
2. Preservice teachers' responses in a written assignment on the topic of resilience submitted at the end of the term; and
3. Preservice teachers' contributions to a blog on the topic of Teacher Resilience.

Survey questions were developed around dimensions of risk and protective factors.. The first dimension was the awareness of potential stressors that impact on the work of preservice teachers in relation to coursework and professional experience; and the second, the awareness of ways preservice teachers can increase their resiliency in managing these stressors. Responses were collected and analysed using Nvivo to code categories from the data. These categories were then considered using the Knight framework for resilience education (Knight, 2007b) as an analytical tool.

The Knight 3-dimensional framework aligns with the positive psychology field of resilience and proposes a model for educating about resilience. Resilience as 'a state' and as 'a condition', help us to conceptualise and understand the phenomenon of resilience. That is, what it is and how it is evident in one's life. Whereas the dimension of resilience as 'a practice' is about the action one can take to promote resilience.

Dimension 1: Resilience as 'a state' provides a list of personal characteristics associated with healthy development. These characteristics are considered to be present in a resilient person based largely on the work of Benard (2001). These characteristics suggest that a resilient person possesses emotional competence, social competence and is futures orientated (Knight, 2007a). The characteristics described here are not fixed and a healthy person may be more or less resilient not only at different points in life but about different events at the same stage of one's life.

Dimension 2: Resilience as 'a condition' refers to the risk and protective factors associated with the profession. In this case, risk factors are the stressors and protective factors are the ways preservice teachers managed their stressors.

Dimension 3: Resilience as ‘a practice’ suggests that teachers can learn how to be more resilient and be strengthened to cope with the stressors and tensions of teaching by drawing on their resilience. Studying resilience as a topic in a subject in preservice teacher education is one practice that supports this learning. It is resilience as ‘a practice’ that makes the Knight framework for resilience education distinctive.

Findings & discussion

A number of categories of stressors and ways of coping were associated with resilient responses. Coursework related stressors can be described as those stressors that were considered emanating from tasks that were undertaken to satisfy on-campus course requirements. Professional experience related stressors are best defined as stressors associated with the time preservice teachers spent in schools as part of their course.

Resilience as ‘a condition’: Risk factors

Responses preservice teachers gave to the question “What, if anything, did you find stressful in your learning journey in [the subject]?” were listed as the ‘risk factors’. ‘Risk factors’ are the stressors or circumstances that place teachers ‘at risk’. An analysis of the data showed major perceived stressors associated with coursework as being: workload pressures; anxiety associated with meeting online requirements of the subject; time management issues; and doubts about their personal competencies for the tasks. Major stressors associated with professional experience were: apprehension about behaviour management; lack of confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of the school experience; concerns about managing the workload in terms of planning and preparation; anxiety about their relationship with their School Based Teacher Educator (their mentor in the schools) and with their relationship with the students; and doubts about possessing adequate teaching skills.

Risk factors/stressors associated with professional experience

The most prevalent stressor associated with professional experience was behaviour management with 24% of respondents indicating apprehension about their ability to manage the class. This reflects a common concern in the literature. Grayson and Alvarez (2008, p. 1351) report “Researchers have found that student behavior and discipline problems (e.g. verbal disrespect, violence) are the primary reasons cited for teacher stress and burnout”.

Fifteen percent of the preservice teachers surveyed indicated a lack of confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of the school experience as another stressor. Concerns included “whether I’d be good enough” and “having to get up in front of my class and an evaluator”. An interesting finding in the data was the disconfirmation of preservice teachers’ perceived stressors during their actual experience in relation to professional experience with comments such as “My confidence and ability to manage behaviour was not a concern. I dealt with it well” and “I found I was worrying too much as when it came to doing these things I handled them well”.

Other stressors that preservice teachers noted were concerns about: managing the workload; relationships to the School Based Teacher Educator; understanding the requirements of professional experience; relationships with the students in the class; possessing adequate teaching skills; and time management. An interesting finding was concern caused by preservice teachers' perception of the schools they were assigned. Preservice teachers indicated they had concerns with things like "getting a 'bad' school" or getting "bad teachers/students/parents". Our interpretation of these comments is that certain schools/School Based Teacher Educators have a reputation for being challenging and unsupportive and preservice teachers were apprehensive about this. One preservice teacher (Student 29) noted, "The need for positive mentoring can also manufacture stress if the novice does not get the mentor they so aspire for, or if their mentor is not an encouraging one".

Risk factors/stressors associated with coursework

The overwhelming stressor associated with coursework was the workload. Thirty-three percent of preservice teachers indicated concerns around keeping up with the work and not falling behind; and being organized, self motivated and staying on track with work.

Time management and the demands of the online requirements were reported as concerns by 12% of participants. Lectures were all online and participants were required to contribute to weekly blogs.

Resilience as 'a condition': Protective Factors

In the Knight 3-dimensional framework for resilience education, protective factors that are external include the people and strategies that provide support to those experiencing circumstances that are considered risk factors. Analysing the ways in which preservice teachers coped with the perceived stressors gives an indication of what their protective factors are. Protective factors can mitigate the risk factors (Benard, 1991).

Relationships as protective factors

In reviewing the ways of coping with stressors, relationships were identified as the largest area of influence partly because of its multifaceted nature. Types of relationships included preservice teachers' relationships with their School Based Teacher Educator (their mentor in the schools); their families; their peers; and their university lecturers.

Relationship with School Based Teacher Educator

There was evidence that preservice teachers were empowered by experienced mentors. Students spoke about feeling encouraged, supported and able to learn from negative experiences when relationships with their School Based Teacher Educator (SBTE) were robust. This was a typical comment:

My SBTE gave me some advice in that issues like these will be faced throughout your teaching career. After I had spoken to my SBTE and I had time to reflect on the situation, my feelings were not so negative (Student 6).

Preservice teachers valued the support from their School Based Teacher Educators and found it to be a protective factor. This finding correlates with Fives, Hamman & Olivarez (2007) study into burnout and the student teacher experience. Lower burnout rates were reported for preservice teachers who had high levels of support from their cooperating teachers.

Other relationships

A number of preservice teachers indicated they found support among their family and friends. A typical comment was *“I have turned to my partner, family members, friends and school based teacher educator for advice. Without these confidants, my ability to bounce back from a bad experience would be minimal and my stress levels immense”*.

Preservice teachers generally did not mention seeking support from their university lecturers as a coping mechanism. Only three preservice teachers mentioned lecturers as support people for dealing with stressors.

Resilience as ‘a practice’

Resilience as ‘a practice’ involves providing opportunities to raise awareness of what resilience is, to talk about resilience and to learn skills to enhance resilience. In this study preservice teachers expressed value in the small exposure they had to resilience as a concept. Key messages were that they felt the study of the topics of Teacher Resilience had increased their awareness of the concept of resilience, and had provided them with some of the tools to promote their own resilience.

One of the subject outcomes was that preservice teachers should be able to describe the factors that increase one’s resilience and illustrate resilient responses. Resilience education has at its core, the notion that a person can learn the skills to become more resilient and cope with stressful life events. The following quote reflects that understanding in relation to coping with the stressors of teaching.

I have learnt that as a teacher, you must see things for what they are. You cannot let negative experiences overpower, overtake or impair your abilities of being a confident, knowledgeable, and effective teacher. I have also learnt that resiliency includes being able to learn from mistakes and set-backs that occur in your teaching, yet having the ability to critically reflect, think, and make changes to prevent them from occurring again (Student 5).

Respondents also indicated that they had taken on board the practical application of resilience education for their professional lives. By increasing their awareness of the concept of resilience, preservice teachers were able to attach the language of resilience to everyday events that they could now see as ‘risk factors’ or ‘protective factors’. They spoke of looking after their wellbeing; taking steps to reduce stress such as going for walks and taking time out; and using self-talk to decatastrophise stressful situations.

Studying the topics of Teacher Resilience named these practices as being worthwhile and having educational significance.

Implications & recommendations

Resilience education has been shown to provide support for preservice teachers as they enter the teaching profession with some skills to manage the emotional aspects of their professional work. One preservice teacher recognised the importance of being a mentally healthy, resilient teacher when stating: *“Resilience is a key element to a healthy classroom because if I, as the teacher, am not feeling confident, happy and strong how can I hope to make my students feel confident, happy or strong?(Student 25)”*

While this paper does not lay claim to the evidence that preservice teachers were more or less resilient as a result of engaging with the topic of teacher resilience, it does suggest that resilience education had an affect on the preservice teachers involved as evidenced in the following ways. Preservice teachers in this study showed that they benefited from recognising their resilience and talking about their resilient responses to events in their undergraduate program. To further enhance this resilience, teacher education programs need to consider building resilience education into each level of their programs. This would involve opportunities to learn the skills required for emotional competence, social competence and a futures orientation. It would involve naming the risk factors in their profession and building the protective factors that enable new teachers to maintain their resilience.

Davis & Cooke (2007, p. 348) suggest *“Learning embedded in educational systems derived from worldviews that ‘sustain unsustainability’ is a significant part of the problem. What is needed is education and learning that transforms rather than replicates existing patterns of injustice and inequality, and unhealthy lifestyles and environments”*.

While this study showed that preservice teachers who engaged with the topic of teacher resilience, were able to identify stressors and were also able to share resilient responses, the study is limited because it is not possible to say whether preservice teachers will transfer this knowledge in future subjects and teaching experiences. Teacher stress has the potential to affect the mental health of teachers. Preservice teachers who have participated in resilience education and who are able to provide resilient responses to the challenges of their profession, would conceivably be less likely to contribute to the statistics of teacher stress and early career attrition, and more likely to contribute to a profession that is mentally healthy and sustainable.

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