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# Cultivating Teacher Resilience

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# Chapter 16

## Teachers' Resilience: Conceived, Perceived or Lived-in



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**Abstract** Schools in Western countries are places where work-related conditions lead to teacher disaffection and attrition. To mitigate this employers and scholars advocate fostering teacher resilience. This chapter presents a critical examination of teacher resilience. Originally *conceived* as a personal trait, later research showed human resilience is an attribute that can be developed. Resilience is one's ability to manage stressors and maintain adaptive functioning across all domains of life. Latterly, scholars investigated resilience in teachers, mainly through qualitative or quantitative self-report studies. This research constitutes *perceived* teacher resilience, because as formulated, teacher resilience is conceptually flawed, limited in scope, based on teachers' functioning within their professional lives. We do not know what constitutes long-serving teachers' actual, lived-in resilience: what enables teachers to maintain their wellbeing and effectiveness in the classroom, reflecting human resilience as originally conceived. For an accurate profile of teacher resilience we must study those still teaching, and teachers who have exited the profession to determine why they left. Perhaps exiting the profession signals a resilient person who does not accept working conditions that do not support wellbeing or teaching effectiveness. Perhaps 'teacher resilience' is inaccurately used in the context of teacher attrition and disaffection.

**Keywords** Teacher · Resilience · Wellbeing · Effectiveness

### 16.1 Background

There is global concern about teacher attrition, particularly in developed countries. In western OECD countries teacher retention and attrition are in crisis with a mass exodus occurring in most countries (OECD 2019). For example, a recent UK survey of over 4000 teachers documented that 79% of schools reported having difficulties in recruiting staff, with 43% of teachers in their employ planning to leave the

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profession within the next five years (Lightfoot 2016). More recently Australian media reported that 40% of Australian teaching graduates quit within the first five years of entering the profession (Molloy 2019) reflecting a persistent and apparently intractable problem of early career teachers in Australia (Gallant and Riley 2014).

Often cited reasons for wanting to leave teaching are punishing workloads, unsustainable pressure to meet targets, stress associated with excessive bureaucracy, work intensification, as well as issues related to disruptive pupil behaviour (Mansfield et al. 2016). Some of these factors can also lead to an exodus through demoralisation (Santoro 2018). Using stress, lack of wellbeing or other psychological process as reasons for teachers to quit the profession owing to dissatisfaction with working conditions suggests burnout or an inability to cope.

Burnout implies that a person has finite physical and emotional resources, that challenging work conditions consume these resources and that when they are exhausted the individual, the teacher in this case, is no longer able to work effectively. Since burnout is an individual's response, in order to remediate it, a person's capacity to cope and adapt to challenging work needs to be fostered. Thus a call has been made across a number of occupational fields, including teaching, to build employees' resilience (e.g. Blincoe and Grant 2019; Grant and Kinman 2014; Harrington 2018; Mansfield et al. 2018; Beltman et al. 2019; Castro et al. 2010; Gu, and Day 2007). The call essentially means that teachers must become resilient to increase their tolerance for difficult work conditions.

It is no surprise then that teacher resilience evolved as a research focus in the last 15 years in an attempt to understand and mitigate teacher attrition. Countless studies have been published linking self-reported resilience to positive professional outcomes, such as, occupational wellbeing, commitment, efficacy, engagement, motivation, or a positive sense of identity (Bowles and Arnup 2016; Brouskeli et al. 2018; Day and Gu 2014; Day and Hong 2016; Hong 2012; Mansfield et al. 2016; Papatraianou and Le Cornu 2014).

However, to mitigate teacher attrition through increased teacher resilience as has been advocated it is important to look more critically and holistically at the resilience of those who are teachers. This raises a range of questions for consideration:

- Is teacher resilience as currently conceptualised equated with professional resilience?
- Does having teacher resilience erode a teacher's resilience in other areas of their lives, with attendant alcoholism, sleeplessness and anxiety, but a stalwart maintenance of their teaching duties?
- Can teachers be resilient but not be effective in the classroom?
- Are teachers deemed to be resilient if still teaching but on performance reviews?
- Exactly how do employers characterise resilient teachers?

By reflecting upon the questions above the term teacher resilience might need to be redefined, re-evaluated or re-operationalised.

## 16.2 Chapter Purpose and Organization

To respond to the issues presented in relation to teacher resilience this chapter will outline aspects of resilience currently acknowledged and derived from the body of literature. First, a review of human resilience as originally conceived and defined by scholars is outlined. That is followed by a brief distillation of research findings and conceptualisations of teacher resilience. Then, two case study vignettes are presented to illustrate some of the complexities of teachers' career trajectories, to enable the reader to consider resilience holistically. The final section of the chapter proposes and rationalises the formulation of a theoretical framework to examine and research teacher resilience in situ, or lived-in teacher resilience, a more comprehensive representation of teacher resilience.

## 16.3 Conceived, Theoretical Tenets of Resilience

### 16.3.1 *Human Resilience*

The concept of resilience was originally used in the 1640s, to mean 'springing back'. It had roots in the Latin verb 'resilire', but was not used figuratively about individuals till about 1830. In the twentieth century Werner and Smith (1992) and Rutter (1987) adopted the term to describe their findings in the context of research with children growing up in adverse conditions who demonstrated positive adaptation and coping. Resilience is conceived to be an interactive phenomenon inferred from longitudinal research that indicates that some individuals achieve relatively good outcomes despite having experienced serious and continuous stresses or adversities—their outcomes being better than those of other individuals who suffered the same experiences. Werner and Smith (1992) were pioneers, not only in highlighting the importance of resilience, but also in showing the role of social support. Definitions of resilience are many but they all distil to a similar meaning:

- Resilience is the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors. (Kaplan et al. 1996, p. 158)
- [Resilience is] the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence ... despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma. (Egeland et al. 1993).

Resilience is said to be a trait that varies from person to person. The notion of resilience as a trait is based on multiple research explorations which suggest that "Persons who experience high degrees of stress without falling ill have a personality structure differentiating them from persons who become sick under stress" (Kobasa 1979, p. 3). And that resilience stems from "a personality dimension that is believed to confer resistance against the effects of psychological stress" (Contrada 1989, p. 896). Longitudinal developmental studies examining the incidence of disease and

psychopathology in developing children showed that even with prolonged severely negative experiences, there is a huge difference amongst children in their responses (Rutter et al. 1998). These differences were due to a lack of genetic vulnerability; a higher IQ and characteristic temperament and personality features (Rutter et al. 1998). More recently, the Dunedin longitudinal studies (e.g. Caspi et al. 2003, 2004; Evans and Kim 2013) confirmed that resilience is based on genetic factors that are involved in supporting wellbeing and protection against both depression and antisocial behaviour, making resilience a personal trait.

### 16.3.2 *Teachers' Resilience*

Human resilience conceptions point to indicators of a person's adaptation to life, which perforce encompasses their work. Therefore conceptions of resilience have been extended to teachers based on the idea that resilience as an individual's trait or attribute may be manifest in teachers who remain in the profession because it is claimed that resilience is vital in dealing with the demands of complex organisations (Athota et al. 2019) such as schools (see also Chap. 2).

The various understandings (or conceptions) of resilience emphasise a return to original functioning after stressors have been applied, or bouncing forward to a new state of optimal functioning in response to a stressor (s). Since resilience is the capacity to cope by overcoming odds, to demonstrate the personal strength needed to withstand hardship or adversity (Boniwell and Ryan 2012), scholars assert resilience must be *developed* to help teachers cope with challenges in their work. This is because in addition to being deemed a personal trait resilience is considered to be "a process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events, in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event" (Richardson et al. 1990, p. 34). Resilience as a process is corroborated by Luthar et al. (2000) who cite studies which show resilience involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that anyone can learn and develop. These include mental features such as a 'planning' tendency, self-reflection to assess what has worked, a sense of agency or determination to deal with challenges and self-confidence in being able to do so successfully (Rutter 2013). Specifically, teacher resilience has been "conceptualised as a capacity, a process and also as an outcome" (Mansfield et al 2016, p. 80). Mansfield et al (2016) elaborate that a resilient teacher can use personal characteristics and contextual elements to support their management of challenges, to develop and achieve professional satisfaction over time coupled with wellbeing.

The development of resilience in teachers is rendered even more important in light of an emerging body of research that links developing resilience capability with increased levels of employees' subjective wellbeing, psychosocial outcomes, job satisfaction and performance (Grant and Burton 2009; Shepherd et al. 2009; Robertson et al. 2015). Based on the notion that resilience can be developed, explorations of teacher resilience have also looked at teacher resilience in relation to

contextual or ecological factors, both positive and negative—school support, family support, behaviour management policies, professional learning, socio-emotional competence and socioeconomic factors of school clientele and so on (Day et al. 2006).

In sum, teacher resilience is conceived as being characterised by job satisfaction, commitment, teaching efficacy, motivation, wellbeing and professional sense of identity (see for example, Day and Gu 2014; Day and Hong 2016; Hong 2012; Mansfield et al. 2016; Papatraianou and Le Cornu 2014). Personal factors thought to be important in developing teaching resilience include: emotional competence (Ee and Chang 2010), empathy (Jennings et al. 2011; Tait 2008), a sense of purpose (Day 2014), optimism (Day 2014; Tait 2008), intrinsic motivation (Kitching et al. 2009), and self-belief (Gu and Day 2007; Le Cornu 2009). At the same time, contextual or ecological influences on teacher adaptation and resilience have been deemed to be school culture (Day 2014; Peters and Pearce 2012), teacher involvement in decision-making processes (Johnson et al. 2014), positive relationships with management (Cameron and Lovett 2014), and supportive, mentoring relationships with colleagues (Brunetti 2006; O'Sullivan 2006). With the caveat that it is not known how each of these characteristics contribute to teacher resilience and by how much.

### ***16.3.3 Perceived Teacher Resilience***

As the name suggests perceived resilience is an evaluation of resilience that is made by teachers' own reflections of aspects of their resilience. Even the most rigorous attempts to determine teacher resilience are merely tapping into perceptions of clusters of factors thought to underpin resilience, determined by self-report. These are either surveys or interviews or, less frequently, reports from others—supervisors or colleagues. Much of the research centred on teacher resilience noted above derives from self-reported teacher perceptions.

That said, they are all subject to confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance (Williams et al. 2016) which are our unrequited mental heuristics employed sub-consciously when we are responding to any questions. Self-reported questionnaires are often associated with the possibility of bias (especially recall bias) and thus may provide invalid answers (Demetriou et al. 2015). Another issue, socially desirable responding (SDR) is a serious confounding factor in studies which use self-report questionnaires. Van de Mortel (2008) who examined 14275 health-related surveys found that the tendency for people to present a favourable image of themselves on questionnaires (socially desirable responding (SDR)) contaminated 99% of studies' results. SDR confounds research results by creating false relationships or obscuring relationships between variables. In a study currently conducted by the author, the discrepancy between self-report and observations of behaviour is very strong. The study in question is examining self-reported culturally responsive behaviour management. The research used initial surveys for teachers to self-report the number of times they use certain behaviour management strategies. Subsequently these same teachers

were observed a number of times in situ with their students. Results showed that about a quarter of all teachers underestimated the number of behaviour strategies they used in the surveys, while another quarter, inflated them. Overall then, self-report surveys alone are unlikely to be reliable evidence of teacher resilience.

Despite the recognised limitations of self-report surveys, the vast majority of research around teacher resilience is based on them. Reviews of the literature which have documented large numbers of studies around teacher resilience (e.g. Beltman et al. 2011) show that these studies mostly comprise of survey or small scale qualitative perceptions of resilience; indeed most identified studies also rely on perceptions of resilience (e.g. Ainsworth and Oldfield 2019; Gu and Day 2007; Flores 2018; Hong 2012; Mansfield et al. 2012).

## 16.4 Case Study Vignettes

The vignettes below are derived from an ongoing qualitative research project undertaken in two schools, to explore teachers work and life histories to better understand their resilience. Participants were first identified by their Principals as potential contributors to the project. They were then approached and asked to volunteer in the study. They were informed that the study had been granted ethical clearance by the university. The methods employed in the study were teacher and Principal interviews.

The selected vignettes illustrate differences relating to teacher resilience, disaffection and possibly classroom effectiveness. According to advocates of teacher resilience for mitigating attrition, both teachers would be deemed resilient since they had not left the profession at the time of interview. However, in the professional domain strong disaffection, disengagement and sub-optimal pedagogy are evident in the vignettes. Chris, the Health and Physical Education (HPE) teacher relates strong disaffection with the profession and a desire to leave the Australian education system. Steph the History/Biology teacher's narrative coupled with the Principal's discussion around her performance, suggests disengagement. In relation to other aspects of their lives, neither teacher reported experiences of significant trauma in their upbringing, although each has been through a divorce, a potentially significant stressor, which could have impacted upon their functioning professionally over time, especially in the case of the history/biology teacher.

### 16.4.1 *Chris, 45 Years Old, HPE Teacher and Head of Sport*

Chris has been an HPE teacher for 22 years. He graduated with a Sports Science and Education degree and began his teaching in Queensland State High Schools. He then moved to teach in Catholic Schools where he rose to be Head of Sport in a large K-12 Catholic School. His passion for healthy living and sport has never abated and he

has always connected very well with his students. In fact, according to his Principal, his students speak very highly of him and observations of his classes show a positive classroom climate.

Raised in a middle-class family with one other sibling, Chris attended a prestigious boarding school in a metropolitan city. His family was united with close connections to each other and their very large extended family. Chris was married and had two sons, but that marriage dissolved. Over time, Chris developed a strong spiritual focus which has led him to travel to developing countries to volunteer as a teacher for short stints. His travel overseas and his experiences in Australia have recently led him to want to leave the teaching profession. His stated explanation for this is that he does not feel he is making a difference to his students in Australia. Because, he stated, students are not motivated, the work is intensified and he is under supported in the inclusive classes he has to teach. He feels that the students are not learning because his time is by necessity focused on the needs of the handful of students with disabilities in his class. As a result, he believes that all his students are underserved. The work intensification in relation to the new external exam system that Queensland is transitioning to, the administration load that teachers have to shoulder in relation to legislated requirements also take away from what Chris calls quality teaching. He also relayed that in the developing countries where he has volunteered, Cambodia, India and Thailand, teachers are paid a very small salary but have very high societal respect, while the converse he believes to be true in Australia. Teachers are highly paid in Australia but not valued by society. All these factors have influenced his decision to leave the profession in Australia and seek meaningful teaching employment overseas.

#### ***16.4.2 Steph: 45 Years Old, Secondary History and Biology Teacher***

Steph reported having experienced a happy childhood in a close nuclear family with two other sisters. She has been married twice and has three daughters from her current second marriage. She has maintained a continuous teaching career from the time she graduated with a B. Ed. degree. Her teaching has centred in state secondary schools, in regional Queensland. However, due to some interpersonal professional and personal issues, she has been relocated several times within the State Department of Education. Most recently, she has taken a post as science coordinator in a faith-based school serving K-12 students. She has never had classroom or behaviour management problems as in her own words, she is a strong disciplinarian, and she professes a strong Christian faith. Steph has not considered leaving the teaching profession at any stage of her career.

According to her Principal, observations of her teaching show that her classes are quiet and the students are generally task-focused. Steph's primary pedagogical approach involves written work based on a textbook chapter or worksheet for students to read and answer questions while she observes the class from her seat at the front

of the class. Little actual interaction or questioning takes place with the students; student results are generally mediocre.

## 16.5 Lived-in Teacher Resilience

Resilience as applied to those working in the teaching profession is complex, especially when proposed as a means of addressing teacher attrition and disaffection. The vignettes above illustrate this point. Recall that scholars characterised resilience by an individual's capacity to cope and adapt well across all areas of their lives both professional and personal. And teacher resilience was proposed by Mansfield et al (2016) to be "...a capacity, a process and also an outcome" (p. 80). Whether the vignettes indicate resilience, teaching resilience or overall resilience, is too difficult to determine accurately based on such limited data. But the vignettes certainly give rise to an imperative to further research the questions posed earlier around teacher resilience.

The imperative to examine teacher resilience more rigorously rests on findings which highlight the alarming trend of disaffection and attrition in the teaching profession: high rates of burnout, psychological distress and physical health problems (e.g. De Heus and Diekstra 1999; Kovess-Masféty et al. 2006; Pretsch et al. 2012), suicide contemplation (Pietrzak et al. 2011) and anxiety disorders (Pollack et al. 2004). That imperative also stems from research that shows teacher resilience affects a teacher's students through their classroom effectiveness (e.g. Day et al. 2006; Gu and Day 2007). This is because research shows resilience supports teacher wellbeing which is associated with teacher effectiveness via students' increased wellbeing and decreased levels of mental health issues, such as depression.

For example, in a cross-sectional study of over 3000 Grade 8 students and over 1100 teachers examining teacher and student mental health outcomes, and the links between them, associations were found between teacher wellbeing and student wellbeing and psychological distress (Harding et al. 2019). Associations between teacher depression and student wellbeing have also been identified (Harding et al. 2019). Earlier research linked lower levels of teacher wellbeing with teachers' poorer longer-term mental health (Melchior et al. 2007). Indeed, poor wellbeing and depressive symptoms have been associated with teachers' self-rated underperformance while at work (Kidger et al. 2016). This underperformance can impact on student outcomes and their mental health through teachers' reduced ability to develop a supportive classroom environment and to manage classrooms effectively (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Teachers experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing may also find it difficult to develop good quality relationships with students (Kidger et al. 2016; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Unsurprisingly, low levels of teacher wellbeing can lead to higher rates of teacher absences, which in turn impact student outcomes and supportive teacher–student relationships (Jamal et al. 2013).

Motivated and enthusiastic teachers have long been considered to be vital for the provision of quality education (Keller et al. 2016); this requires that they have a

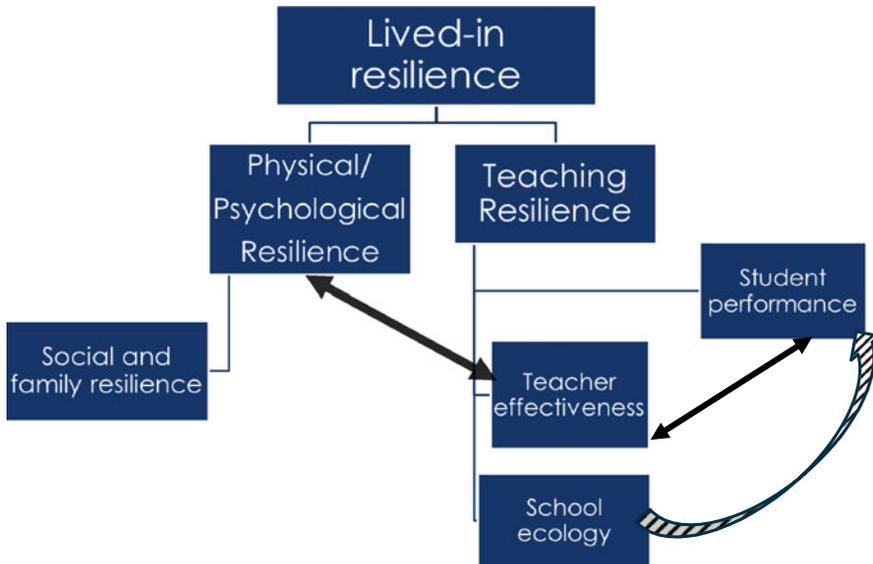
sense of wellbeing (Wessels and Wood 2019). Increased teacher wellbeing has dual benefits. First, it can positively impact teacher effectiveness and satisfaction (Luthans et al. 2008). Second, it can permeate to learners, leading to more satisfaction, which impacts upon academic results (Hansen et al. 2015).

It is important therefore to use better, more robust, indicators than self-reported perceptions to assess teachers' resilience and experience of physical and psychological wellbeing. To date none of the studies identified around teacher resilience have examined resilience holistically in Australian teachers who are effective in their work and who exhibit high levels of wellbeing and resilience to stressors. By holistically measuring resilience, the lived-in resilience of teachers is assessed. Lived-in resilience in teachers is conceptualised as demonstrating teaching effectiveness and physical and mental wellbeing as measured and indicated by the absence of physiological markers and psychopathology. A state of physical and mental health in the absence of medications, characterised by a lack of unexplained absenteeism from work and paucity of doctor's/counsellors visits. In other words, positive adaptation, coping and the ability to function effectively across all domains of life. Moreover, a resilient teacher should demonstrate adaptive functioning by meeting their professional obligations: demonstrating appropriate pedagogies and classroom management practices to support their students learning.

No research has been identified that has employed a multimethod design, including comprehensive information regarding teachers' beliefs and experiences, biomarkers, that is, rigorous psychological and physiological measures, teaching effectiveness measures using students' academic progress, as well as historical/longitudinal evaluations of teacher performance by school administrators. Such research would lead to a more accurate understanding of the lived-in resilience and experiences of those teachers who are committed to teaching, who flourish in the profession and provide quality education for their students.

The lived-in resilience framework proposed below is a more accurate way to measure resilience as it was originally conceived and validated by a range of longitudinal studies (e.g. Rutter 1987; Werner and Smith 1992). It measures functioning across professional (e.g. teaching) and personal (physical, psychological, social and family) domains of a person's life, by accounting for all factors that impact upon a person's wellbeing and adaptive functioning. Recall that to be deemed resilient an individual must demonstrate positive adaptation and functioning despite prolonged exposure to stressors/disadvantage (e.g. Egeland et al. 1993; Kaplan et al. 1996; Rutter et al. 1998). The framework takes into account the contextual social factors and support that impact upon an individual, which have been found to be determinants of the development of resilience (Werner and Smith 1992). The conceptual framework that comprises the above considerations is shown in Fig. 16.1.

It is proposed that measures of lived-in resilience in those who have remained in the profession for a substantial time will provide a better lens to examine teachers' adaptive functioning to help address disaffection and attrition. Figure 16.1 shows that lived-in resilience is the result of high measures of physical/psychological resilience and teaching resilience. The teaching resilience branch can be assessed using measures documented by, (see for example Mansfield et al., 2016), e.g. job



**Fig. 16.1** Lived-in resilience framework. Pathways and feedback loops from a range of factors contribute to the experience of lived-in resilience

satisfaction, commitment, teaching efficacy, motivation *and* through teacher effectiveness measures. These can be assessed through proxies such as student performance outcomes, student behaviour incidents, classroom climate, student motivational profiles. The school ecology or climate will impact on student performance outcomes through policies and procedures that are in place. School climate will also affect teacher resilience measures and so these factors also need to be accounted for.

Psychological/physical resilience has a long history, providing many instruments and means for assessment (e.g. medical histories, psychological resilience and distress instruments), including the more recently developed hair cortisol level tests to objectively measure stress. Since social, family and contextual ecological factors impact upon individuals resilience these must be assessed in the context of physical/psychological resilience. Critically, as shown in Fig. 16.1 teacher effectiveness has a bidirectional influence on psychological/physical resilience.

## 16.6 Implications and Future Directions

Research shows that there are complex links between psychological/physical resilience and teaching resilience. In turn, these links are likely influenced by contextual school factors and also impact upon student outcomes via a range of pathways not at present delineated. There appears to be a link between teacher self-reported

resilience and wellbeing and teacher effectiveness. However, the empirical source of this link is not sufficiently robust as it is based on self-report measures.

The contention that by raising resilience teacher attrition will be stemmed is one that does not fit well with the lived-in framework of resilience, as we do not have robust empirical data to support it. As illustrated by the case study vignettes, dedicated teachers leave the profession not only because they are burnt out, but for a range of reasons, including demoralisation. Or they might remain in the profession but be effectively disengaged and not catering well for their students' needs. Demoralised teachers, Santoro (2018) contends, abandon teaching because they feel unable to meet the professional expectations they impose on themselves. Demoralisation occurs when teachers know exactly what their professional values require of them but they cannot do what they believe needs to be done (p. 48). And if demoralization is due to institutional demands, then possible solutions are changing policies, practice or leadership context, or, quitting teaching altogether. Recent social media comments also decry the idea of building resilience. Specifically Twitter, documents a range of remarks by academics fed up with resilience being touted as a panacea for work difficulties. For example, "I was told to get resilience training as a response to raising ongoing concerns about problematic workplace issues. Now, I'd like to build a professional development workshop: 'F\*ck Resilience: How to know your rights in the workplace and effectively advocate for them'. Any takers?" (Mercer-Mapstone 9:13 AM Nov 14 2019·Twitter Web App).

At present, we do not know what constitutes teachers' *lived-in* resilience. In future research we need to examine the actual, lived-in resilience of those teachers who, having remained in the profession for many years, continue to maintain stress-free mental and physical health, while performing their professional duties with zeal and excellence. In addition, and perhaps more critically, we need to study individuals who have exited the profession to determine why they left. Was it because of low resilience, as reflected by mental and physical health attributes, or because they were resistant and resilient to impositions of an external set of factors underpinning a system that they wanted to change?

Are we making the mistake of equating teacher resilience, as currently described, with acceptance of conditions in a system that must change? Perhaps exiting the profession signals a strong, healthy, resilient person who refuses to succumb to unacceptable demands of a system which does not lead to personal wellbeing or teaching effectiveness.

The foregoing leads to another possibility: is teacher resilience as currently required by employers a teacher's adaptation to professional demands and therefore better reframed and termed professional resilience? If this is the case, to appropriately use the term resilient, policy must stipulate a set of professional conditions that must be managed, along with a scale of their degree of possible challenge. In other words they must set a level of acceptable 'risk' to the teacher. Acceptable risk levels would have to be overcome over a certain period of time for a teacher to be deemed resilient. But herein lies the problem: are education organisations and education policy able to stipulate challenges and risks to be overcome, and assign a measure or level of particular challenges that teachers must be resilient to? And the period of

time that these challenges must be successfully managed? The overwhelming exodus from the profession suggests that policymakers are not observing closely teachers' disaffection and adjusting professional expectations for teachers accordingly.

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