Emerging theory of teacher resilience: a situational analysis

Sally Valentino Drew
Department of Special Education, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, Connecticut, USA, and
Cathy Sosnowski
Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, Connecticut, USA

Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to explore the construct of teacher resilience. Researchers examined the relationship among complex risk (constraining) factors leading to burnout and attrition, as well as protective (enabling) factors that allow teachers to adapt and thrive within stressful school settings.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents results from three focus groups comprised of 33 English language arts teachers across diverse school districts. Utilizing situational analysis, developed from grounded theory, the research plan included six stages: development of initial situational map honoring theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, data collection, coding, memoing, sorting, revising of the initial map based on analysis and literature review to develop the relational map.

Findings – Three propositions emerged beginning to comprise a theory of teacher resilience. (1) Resilient teachers embed roots in their school communities to withstand challenges, pulling from a sense of purpose to navigate constraining factors and benefit from enabling factors. (2) Resilient teachers embrace uncertainty, reframing negative experiences into learning experiences. Reframing helps teachers retain power, not cede it to situations, which helps balance constraining and enabling factors. (3) Teachers use relationships with colleagues, students and school leaders to endure challenges. The dynamic interaction between internal and external enabling and constraining factors is depicted on the situational map illustrating how factors counterbalance to either predict positive outcomes such as resilience and agency or negative outcomes such as burnout or attrition.

Originality/value – Despite a robust international evidence base, there is a dearth of US studies exploring teacher resilience. This study proposes a theory of teacher resilience relevant to US schools and recommends practical applications and future research.

Keywords Risk factors, Agency, Protective factors, Resilience, Relational resilience

Many refer to education as the profession that eats its young (Halford, 1998). Nearly 50 per cent of teachers entering the profession leave in the first five years (Ingersoll and Merrill, 2012). Attrition comprises 90 per cent of the national annual demand for teachers, leading to a persistent shortage (Castro et al., 2018). Working conditions are cited as the primary reason teachers leave (Sutcher et al., 2016). Teachers generally attribute stress to conditions such as lacking support from colleagues and administrators, excessive work demands, inadequate resources and students’ behavior (Chang, 2009). “We have known for many years that teaching can be stressful, particularly for new teachers, but little appears to have changed” (Beltman et al., 2011, p. 185). Teacher stress is only exacerbated by recent trends such as testing pressure, school violence, and student trauma. Patterson and colleagues (2004) explain that “[. . .] each new wave of reform exacerbates teacher burnout” (p. 4).
Teacher stress contributes to burnout and attrition (Sutcher et al., 2016). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) now classifies burnout as an officially recognized syndrome due to unmanaged, chronic workplace stress. It presents as energy depletion and exhaustion, mental distance from one’s job, negativism and cynicism and decreased professional efficacy (WHO, 2019). It also leads to ill health, absence from school and subsequent lower-quality learning environments (Gibbs and Miller, 2014).

Despite these alarming trends, the construct of teacher resilience and its potential proactive influence on teacher retention (Gu, 2014) have not received much attention in literature in the USA, despite a robust international research base. This study explores conditions necessary for English language arts teachers to develop resilience and find voice to express agency. Professional agency enables teachers to be innovative and adaptive within complex work environments and negotiate input from administrators, colleagues, parents and policymakers (Toom et al., 2015). Teacher resilience is a precursor to agency – resilient teachers have resources available to act upon rather than reacting to environmental demands (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

If resilience leads to increased well-being, sense of belonging, passion and engagement (Mansfield et al., 2016), teachers with resilience could operate with agency. In this paper, the researchers posit that teacher resilience is related to, often includes, but is distinct from teacher agency, as well as other similar constructs such as teacher efficacy, emotional intelligence and motivation (Beltman et al., 2011; Mansfield et al., 2016; Tait, 2008). A considerable body of research has established that resilience is a “relative, multidimensional, and developmental construct” (Gu, 2014, p. 507). Werner (1995) summarizes her work by explaining protective factors within the individual, family and community that support a child’s development of resilience. Rutter (2012) describes resilience as a response to environmental stress or adversity and explores how people with resilience experience a “steeling” or strengthening effect in the face of adversity, making future challenges easier to manage. Most resilience research has been conducted with children, not adults.

**Defining teacher resilience**
Defining resilience as “capacity to bounce back” is incomplete and inadequate in a teaching context (Gu and Day, 2013). Teacher resilience is better defined as “capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching” (p. 39) and to “maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency” (Gu and Day, 2013, p. 26). Arguably, teachers who have left teaching have done so in part due to a lack of resilience. However, Mansfield and colleagues (2016) found that teachers who plan to leave the profession face both contextual and personal challenges. As such, resilience is shaped by a dynamic interplay between personal and contextual factors and resources (Mansfield et al., 2016), an interaction over time between risk and protective factors (Beltman et al., 2011).

The construct of teacher resilience draws from a body of literature on resilience in general, but is unique in context. Resilience develops from a dynamic and interactive process of risk management in the face of adversity (Eberson, 2014). Better defined as an ongoing outcome of human adaptation to the environment and not a fixed trait (Masten and Reed, 2005), resilience develops through a process with unique stage goals of survival, recovery and thriving (Ledesma, 2014). Four goals of resilience are to overcome past obstacles, steer through everyday adversity, bounce back after setbacks and reach beyond challenges toward agency (Reivich and Shatte, 2002).
Importance of teacher resilience

Robust international evidence links teacher resilience with teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, motivation and teacher self-efficacy (Beltman et al., 2011; Greenfield, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2016; Papatraianou and Le Cornu, 2014; Peters and Pearce, 2012). Teacher resilience is closely associated with adaptive functioning; resilient teachers are more self-efficacious, make fewer excuses, procrastinate less and take care of themselves (Bowles and Arnup, 2016). The number of years teaching does not positively influence resilience (Bowles and Arnup, 2016). Day-to-day job satisfaction is a strong driver of resilience; teachers often change schools, not to advance their careers, but because of dissatisfaction (Cameron and Lovett, 2015).

Research on teacher resilience conducted in the USA is lacking or dated. A small set of US studies indicates teacher resilience leads to personal and professional fulfillment, a stronger commitment to students, value-driven decision-making (Brunetti, 2006; Patterson et al., 2004). Brunetti and Marston’s (2018) findings revealed a multifaceted continuum of teacher development that when nurtured through collaboration, continuing professional engagement, leadership and balance can lead to increased teacher resilience and agency. Castro et al. (2018) identified a set of strategies new teachers use to build resilience and agency, overcoming adversity within their first year: help seeking, problem-solving, managing difficult relationships and seeking rejuvenation and renewal.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the construct of teacher resilience and the relationship among complex risk factors leading to teacher burnout and subsequent attrition and protective factors that allow teachers to adapt and thrive within stressful school environments through the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How is teacher resilience defined and explained?

RQ2. What constitutes the “risk” (constraining) factors that contribute to a teacher wanting to leave the profession and the “protective” (enabling) factors that contribute to a teacher staying in the profession, and how are they mediated?

The researchers used situational analysis, developed from grounded theory, to elicit thoughts, beliefs, motivations and behaviors of individual teachers within school settings (Clarke et al., 2018). The situation of inquiry was the unit of analysis. Researchers constructed a situational map to depict relationships among human, non-human and contextual factors (Clarke et al., 2018). The situational map was created early and revised across phases of the study to inform theoretical sampling, data collection, analysis and reflection. The researchers developed the initial situational map from lived experiences, RQ and grounded preliminary literature review to fully develop theoretical sensitivity without developing hypotheses too early (Thistoll et al., 2016).

The situational map

Figure 1 illustrates the current situational map reflecting the emerging theory of teacher resilience. A thorough literature review was conducted before data were collected, after data were collected and after analysis to construct, revise and refine the situational map. The dynamic interaction of internal and external, enabling and constraining factors is depicted on the situational map (see Figure 1) informed by study findings, confirmed by international literature on teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016; Sullivan and Johnson, 2012) and related to literature on medical professional resilience (Brigham et al., 2018). How these distinct factors counterbalance over time predict positive outcomes such as resilience and agency or negative
Figure 1. Situational map of teacher resilience.
outcomes such as burnout or attrition (Sullivan and Johnson, 2012) shown above or below the midline on the figure. The goal is to bolster the enabling factors to offset the growing adversity that teachers face on a daily level. Enabling factors include social, emotional, psychological and behavioral competencies to support teachers in overcoming challenges (Gu and Day, 2013) and using their energy productively to manage daily stressors (Patterson et al., 2004).

Teacher efficacy mediates resilience in fueling enabling factors or compounding constraining factors (see Figure 1). International researchers agree that teacher efficacy is a distinct, but related, construct to teacher resilience (Gu and Day, 2013). The ultimate goal of teacher resilience is not just retention, but agency for teachers to adapt to their complex work environments and navigate roadblocks presented by constraining factors.

Sample
English language arts teachers ($n = 33$) from three school districts in one small northeastern state were interviewed in focus groups: one large suburban high school ($n = 13$), one small urban middle school ($n = 12$) and one large urban high school ($n = 8$). Sample composition was established based on theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Sample size reflected typical practice for grounded theory (Marshall et al., 2013), exceeding the median of 32.5 participants in other workplace qualitative research (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). This afforded an opportunity to reach saturation and build theory within the relatively homogeneous population.

Group demographics were representative of the state’s English teaching workforce (72.73 per cent women; 93.94 per cent white). Teaching experience fell mostly in the 15-20-year band (69.70 per cent), with 15 per cent in the 5-10-year band, and 12 per cent over 25 years. One teacher in the third focus group had 46 years of experience. The paucity of teachers in the 1-5-year band is a lingering effect of the Great Recession of 2008. In the third focus group’s district, 12 per cent of teaching positions, including 20 English language arts positions, were eliminated during the recession. In the other two districts, positions were eliminated, though not as draconically, resulting in English departments skewed to veteran teachers a decade later.

Data collection and analysis
The grounded theory values the context in which people function and the roles they adopt in the interaction (Glaser, 1992). Focus groups were selected to observe teachers in trust-building and natural settings interacting with departmental colleagues (Parker and Tritter, 2006). Three focus groups were conducted each one week apart during scheduled department meetings. Session duration was 39, 39 and 32 min. Researchers used semi-structured interview protocols with RQ as base questions and follow-up questions asked as appropriate. Questions (see see Focus group questions) were open-ended, invitational and reflective, asking teachers to define concepts from experiences rather than pre-conceived definitions or categories.

Focus group questions
(1) How would you describe the construct of “teacher resilience”?
(2) How important is it that teachers are resilient in the profession?
(3) Can you describe a mentor or colleague whom you consider to be “resilient” as a teacher?
(4) Have you ever considered leaving the profession?
   • Why did you stay in the profession (follow up)? What factors led/lead you to want to stay?
(5) How do you mitigate on-the-job stress? Do these actions help you to be more resilient?
Researchers introduced themselves and acknowledged their stories as teachers. Sessions were audio-recorded, and the participants were invited to follow up with researchers via email.

Audio files were transcribed. Each participant’s contribution was coded in conversational turns by conceptual unit and then categorized. A conceptual unit ranged from a word (i.e. flexible) to several sentences (i.e. an example of a time the teacher wanted to leave teaching). Conceptual units were captured as words or phrases on an initial code list/scheme (available upon request) and subsequently categorized into three overarching concepts through open, selective and axial coding. The initial situational map was iteratively revised to include all emerging concepts and categories to explain patterns of interaction within the setting. Data analysis continued until saturation, or when all conceptual units were represented on the situational map in appropriate categories with explanations. The map and findings were shared with participants to enhance trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). The ultimate goal of this methodology is to propose theory to explain the phenomenon of inquiry (Glaser, 1992).

Findings: theory-building
Researchers analyzed transcript data to develop an initial theory of teacher resilience guided by the situational map. Patterns of response were examined across all focus groups to build theory.

RQ1. Defining teacher resilience
The participants defined teacher resilience through attributes: “adaptable, thick skin, don’t take things personally, ability to see the big picture.” Some teachers defined resilience as the opposite of burnout – “[teachers who are resilient are] the ones who stay.” One stated, “[…] Is it just opposite of burning out? Is it just coming back every year? [If so], for now, I guess I’m pretty resilient.” While participants agreed resilience is important for retention, they felt it worse if a burned-out teacher stayed, “Best case scenario if you’re not, you don’t stay. I think it’s worse if you are not resilient and you do [stay].”

One participant described a resilient colleague:

I think there’s this level-headedness and a way to approach things […]. Even if it personally bothered her, it was – I can move forward; it will be great and I can do this.

Moving beyond the notion of just showing up, or coming back every year, one participant stated that a resilient teacher has the “ability to focus on our strengths and see each other’s strengths.”

RQ2. Enabling and constraining factors
To explain the complex relationship among enabling and constraining factors on the situational map (Figure 1), three themes, or propositions, emerged to begin to comprise the theory of teacher resilience and are detailed below.

Deep roots: maintaining a sense of purpose. The emerging theory of teacher resilience proposes that teachers who connect consistently with why they entered the profession and why they should persist embed deep roots in the profession and in their school communities, which helps them sustain the storms. Participants’ identity as teachers was connected to their sense of purpose, “[…] before I was a mom, before I was a wife, I was a teacher.” Another stated, “It’s a vocation for some people. You just feel called to do this […].”

The participants shared that teachers who remember their why, and regularly draw from this sense of purpose, are able to persevere despite the prevalence of challenges. One explained, “It’s the idea that you got into this profession for a reason […]. It’s how you continue on.” Reasons participants shared for why they entered teaching were nuanced, but
all related to making a difference for kids. “I think now for me it’s more of a contribution to the community [...] that’s why I don’t see myself leaving [...]” Another aspect participants discussed was how tangible the meaningfulness of the work is. One shared:

My husband is in marketing. I remember one time asking him, when he’s planning an ad campaign for industrial packaging – do you ever feel bad that [it] doesn’t really matter? [...] How do you motivate yourself to do something that just seems so [unimportant] [...] Another clarified, “How many kids in this school are looking at you as a role model [...]? I think that matters [...]”

One shared this story:

I’ve thought about it [leaving the profession]. About ten years in – 36 years ago. My father-in-law was in the insurance business and he said he could get me into it. I went to an appointment and the guy said, yeah, you’ve gotta make 500 cold calls. I wasn’t crazy about the idea anyway. But, the money was probably about three times what we were making here at that point [...] So, I thought about it. But, the bottom line was I didn’t want to do it. I want to do this.

One of the conversations about doing something other than teaching was particularly absurd:

I told my grandmother once that I was having a hard time [...] She says, ‘Well, what are you going to do? Be a hooker?’ It made me laugh [...] I don’t think that would be my only other option, but I don’t know what else is out there for me.

Maintaining a sense of purpose was important for helping teachers persevere through adversity:

[...] The other really important aspect is finding the parts of the school day that balance out the stressors. [...] We hear grading, we hear lesson planning, we hear all the things that weigh us down [...] finding the areas of the day that bring you back to center [...] Something bad happened that derails you, but then something really good happened [...] That’s how I find myself managing.

Small rewards connect teachers daily with their sense of purpose and help them find balance amidst adversity:

Society is definitely impacting us. [...] This is not what I signed up for. I’m doing so much behavior management and trying to repair 13 years of misbehavior in 181 days [...] That’s where that resilience piece comes forward because it’s like why am I doing this?

The participants described the challenge of maintaining a sense of purpose, “The resilience is that you have to be willing to give so much. And, sometimes you may lose other goals or ideas you have for yourself in your career [...] At some point, you are going to have to reconcile [...] do I keep giving so much?” Another teacher said, “For me, it’s selfish. I get energy from the kids. So that helps me keep going.”

The harsh winter. English language arts teachers know the negative possibilities of any given day; many are listed on the situational map as constraining factors: a student’s outburst, a parent email, deadlines, data collection, standardized tests and the never-ending pile of uncorrected papers that is ubiquitous to the teaching of English language arts. The theory of teacher resilience proposes that teachers develop resilience and the ability to weather these storms by choosing to reframe challenges into learning experiences, embracing constant change and uncertainty and drawing on rejuvenating experiences as much as possible.

Optimism. Depicted on the situational map as an internal enabling factor, in contrast to the constraining factor of ruminating on setbacks, resilient teachers choose to perceive
negative aspects of the job through a positive lens (Mansfield et al., 2012). One participant described the importance of optimism:

That sort of assumption that people are trying to do the right thing. That in the long run, we will be okay. Things will be good for kids and good for us. It’s hard to keep that mindset sometimes.

Another described something similar:

For teachers to keep coming back every year, there has to be that [...] not exactly optimism [...] it’s open mindedness. I keep thinking about the years, the dark years, when things were tough. And, the conversations [...] that we will outlast this.”

Renewal through the cyclical nature of school year. Education as cyclical came up within each group. The hope that things would be better next year helped teachers navigate stressors and reframe negative experiences. One described:

There is a finish line at the end of every year and you do get this reboot [...] This sense of ‘I can do it better next year.’ [...] Eventually there will be an end point, which sometimes I feel [is] comforting. This grading [of papers] will stop because it will have to.

The participants shared that embracing the rhythm of the school year can help teachers find balance amidst stressful situations. One participant stated:

[…] Everybody’s always focusing on finding balance in their life, but the reality is that when you are a teacher your balance is more like over the course of a 12-month period of time [...] It’s about finding that moment when the pendulum swings back [...] I can breathe and forgive myself for what I didn’t do well [...] Just trying to find where the center of the pendulum [is].

The participants agreed that summer provided a “reset button,” fostering resilience. “Every September or late August, I always think this is going to be my best performance yet.” Another clarified, “I really like that we have summers off [...] So, even if you’re having a bad year, you would know that it’s only going to last so long [...]”

The participants also spoke about the cyclical nature of educational reforms. The acknowledgment of the “pendulum” and how it swings across their career helped relieve stress. One participant laughed, “We are all going to outlive all kinds of administrators [...] It’s just that it goes around and around and around. But, we’re still here. Philosophies change.”

Accepting the work is ongoing. Teachers across all groups described grading and work outside of school hours to be a constant challenge particular to English language arts. The theory of teacher resilience posits that teachers who are resilient are comfortable with the undone and imperfect. To build from the metaphor of a winter storm, there is always more that can be done to prepare for the storm, but there are just so many hours to do so. Some teachers discussed how hard it was to grant themselves permission to stop working and forgive themselves for not doing more or doing better. One stated:

I think time is the most valuable thing you have. Where you expend that energy and how you use it is big. [...] Once I leave here when school is out, I don’t read emails, I don’t do grading. I’m done until I come in the morning again [...] that’s probably a crucial part of that resilience.

In contrast, one responded:

I know in my gut what [he’s] saying is right and true and trying to leave it here and shut it off [...] I wish I could go home and leave it [grading papers] here. [...] that’s just something I’ve struggled with the last four and half years or so.

Rejuvenating outside of school. What participants do outside of school hours was important for rejuvenation and resilience. Teachers referenced yoga, meditation and a nice glass of wine or
beer as their outlets. Time spent with family and on self-care was essential, but often neglected. In some cases, a teacher’s health was at risk because of stress and lack of self-care. One shared:

And, you start to get worried too because of health issues [. . .]. It’s very stressful. It’s physically exhausting. And, you get to a point where you’re like can I even physically and mentally handle this anymore?

Through their stories, teachers shared the importance of enabling factors, but some acknowledged there just was not enough time in the day for self-care. Teachers joked that the most self-care they have time for was chocolate drive-bys. One teacher described knowing where the stash of chocolate was in the department chair’s file cabinet and doing drive-bys after lunch for a quick pick-me-up and supportive conversation.

*Mirrors and windows.* The participants described the importance of professional relationships with colleagues, administrators and students in sustaining them through harsh winters. Attributed to Rudine Sims Bishop, the metaphor of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors explains the importance of learning from others through diverse literature. Mirrors allow readers to witness their own lives and validate that experience. Windows and sliding glass doors offer opportunities to see others’ perspectives and access new possibilities. The professional relationships participants discussed in the focus group sessions offered both perspectives.

*School culture.* The participants felt that teacher resilience was dependent on school environment, which they described as building culture, camaraderie and school family. One described:

In a different setting [. . .][without] that culture, [. . .] the weight of the world is very much on your shoulders [. . .]. I’ve seen that there is a lot more burnout there. Here, even when we had the craziest days of administration [. . .] that culture was here.

The participants attributed their own resilience and retention to school culture, “You have to find people that you trust.” A few contrasted working in other places and recognizing the difference between strong and weak culture, and how that affects resilience. One stated:

If you talk to other people [. . .] in other districts, they are so jealous of our lives [. . .]. My cousin lasted three years [in a nearby large urban district] [. . .]. She just threw teaching away. I was like, “You gotta rethink that before you actually leave teaching.” [. . .] There was not enough support.

*Collegial relationships.* Relationships with colleagues often served as mirrors for teachers, helping them feel they were not alone. Living a shared experience was reassuring and fostered resilience. One said:

You know the person that’s across the hall from you and can look at you and know that something is wrong and really truly understand what you’re feeling without always having that conversation [. . .]. We have lunch together, we have a meltdown in the faculty room with each other [. . .] Knowing that we have that sense of community with each other.

Several participants described the importance of collegial relationships in deepening resilience. One explained:

I think there is such a respect that we feel for each other as teachers [. . .]. So, if I get down on myself about something or about not being able to keep up with grading or something I don’t do well, my colleagues will bolster me up and will remind me of something I do well [. . .]. I actually feel very supported and I think that helps my resilience.

Whereas, some participants discussed situations in which colleagues served as windows for them to offer new perspectives on professional storms:
I think it’s important to be solution oriented [. . .]. You have to turn to yourself or those people around you and say ‘Okay, who can help me through this?’ [. . .] Instead of me just complaining, it’s being around people who don’t allow you to just complain and will work on the situation for you.

**Leadership.** The participants discussed the role of leadership in cultivating teacher resilience. When teachers felt like they did not have administrator support, it was harder to be resilient. For example:

It always feels like our leaders really aren’t on our side [. . .]. They are not going to bat for us. They might say that they are. But, they don’t really get it. Because they are so pulled in certain directions that they can’t see.

Without strong leadership, and with a great deal of turnover, several participants felt they were “just hanging on by our [their] own.” Some participants attributed absence of strong leadership to bonding the department closer together, “I think it’s brought us closer together. I think we had to be because last year we had four different principals.” One described how she felt her building leader’s unrealistic expectations affected her resilience, “We want more, more, more from you. And, never the acknowledgement that we are here, a lot, giving a lot [. . .]. I can’t possibly give more.” In contrast, one teacher felt, “That support—that definitely helps [. . .] feeling valued [. . .].”

The participants shared the importance of positive relationships with students as playing a role in resilience: “If I’m having a bad day, the kids will notice that. And it always surprises me because I think that they don’t know.” Several expressed their astonishment that even adolescents can be supportive. One said:

They are just humans. My point is that we think of them as their own little section of humanity that doesn’t think about anything or anyone else. But, how many kids are like “Are you okay?”

Being the recipient of student support was one way teachers benefited from positive student relationships, but it was also in helping students who were having a bad day. One shared:

Kids have a bad day. They mouth off [. . .]. don’t take it personally. I took a kid for a walk yesterday [. . .]. He didn’t need to go to the office, but he needed to leave the room. We had two teachers in there, so we went for a walk. We came back and he was fine. I wouldn’t have known that my fifth year. I would have gotten into a screaming match. I would have won, but I would have lost, too.

**Discussion**

This section will explore how study findings, depicted on the situational map, are substantiated by literature as an additional component of data analysis in the grounded theory. The participants were asked to describe the construct of teacher resilience and also to describe a mentor or colleague whom they considered resilient. Some teachers understood that resilience was more than just the opposite of bouncing back after adversity (Gu and Day, 2013). While participants described teachers who stay in the profession as resilient, they were equally concerned about teachers who stay in the profession, but who exhibit burnout through a negative attitude. The following three propositions emerged to comprise the researchers’ emerging theory of teacher resilience within a US context.

*Teachers with purpose build deeper roots in the profession and are more resilient*

One of teachers’ greatest assets in developing resilience is their connection to a higher purpose. In describing teacher resilience and when discussing if they ever considered leaving the profession, focus group participants shared a sense of purpose in becoming a teacher that continues to guide their work. This notion of teaching as a vocation, an identity
or a connection to a moral, ethical purpose is one that stabilizes teachers amidst professional challenges (Greenfield, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014). Shown on the situation map as internal enabling factors, sense of purpose and acknowledgment of teaching as identity/vocation allows teachers to build resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012). Daily re-centering, or everyday resilience, (Gu and Day, 2013), enhances teachers’ capacity to cope with multiple, varied and ongoing challenges. Resilient teachers embed deep roots in their schools and the profession to withstand arising storms, pulling from their sense of purpose to navigate constraining factors and benefit from enabling factors.

**Teachers who reframe challenges into learning experiences, embrace change and uncertainty and draw from rejuvenating experiences are more resilient**

This proposition is the most complex because it includes three seemingly unique components – maintaining a sense of optimism, renewing by riding the ups and downs of the profession, accepting the work is monumental and ongoing, yet being comfortable with the undone and rejuvenating outside of school. The challenge of work–life balance is often depicted in literature on teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016). Self-care is listed as a component of the situational map to reflect its importance in helping teachers to renew. The researchers see all these components as interconnected internal enabling factors or coping mechanisms helping teachers deal with professional stress and adversity.

A sense of optimism allows teachers to focus on their assets and positive experiences and provides perspective for negative experiences. This aspect of the theory is supported by the field of positive psychology. Seligman (2006) argues optimism is a key individual factor that can be learned and contributes to success and achievement. Focus group participants addressed instances when maintaining optimistic perspectives helped them through difficult times. Furthermore, academic optimism is a teacher-specific trait that includes aspects of a teacher’s thoughts, beliefs, feelings and actions, related to teacher agency and resilience (Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2008). Academic optimism has been linked to high-performing teachers and students and is reflected in teachers who possess a strong sense of efficacy, trust in their students and parents and value an academic emphasis (Woolfolk Hoy et al., 2008). A few focus group participants addressed academic optimism when describing that kids, colleagues, parents and administrators are all trying to do the right thing.

The participants expressed that keeping this optimism – focusing on progress, not what is left to complete (i.e. grading papers), looking ahead to future rejuvenation (i.e. summer and school breaks), enjoying down time and opportunities for renewal outside of school – requires the skillset of reframing challenges. This notion is supported by a related psychological construct that has received great attention for its educational implications in US schools: growth mindset (Dweck, 2016). Teachers and students who cultivate a growth mindset view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than as failures. General optimism, academic optimism and growth mindset may enable a teacher to see more possibilities for solutions, helping them to better adapt and return to stability. Adaptability is linked to teacher agency and resilience in the literature (Bowles and Arnup, 2016). The ability to reframe helps teachers retain their power instead of giving it away to the situation, which helps them balance constraining and enabling factors.

**Teachers who benefit from supportive professional relationships with colleagues, administrators and students are more resilient**

This proposition explains how teacher resilience is situated in context. The situational map includes the external enabling factors of positive school culture and the external constraining factors of a challenging school context (as in Gu and Day, 2013).
Teacher resilience includes a dynamic interaction between teacher and environment over time (Beltman et al., 2011). Some researchers state that individualistic notions of resilience do not honor the importance of community in helping teachers become agents of change (Le Cornu, 2013). They argue relational resilience is essential for teachers to build connection, mutuality, empowerment and courage (as in Jordan, 2006). Focus group participants emphasized resilience in context, or relational resilience, as they described the importance of school culture, collegial relationships and effective leadership.

Teacher resilience is socially constructed via contextual influences such as policy, intensity and complexity of teachers’ work, school culture and professional relationships (Johnson et al., 2014). In fact, teachers’ relationships are a foundational enabling factor in nurturing resilience (Greenfield, 2015). Leadership also plays a major role in fostering resilience. In fact, leadership emerges on the situational map as either an enabling or constraining factor, depending on a teacher’s perception. Creating positive work conditions, supporting the fulfillment of teachers’ professional and personal needs and promoting positive career trajectories are actions school leaders can take to engender teacher resilience, leading to improved teacher effectiveness and student performance (Day, 2009). Leaders who are humanistic, take a personal interest in teachers’ well-being, actively participate in their development and nurture positive relationships among school community are needed to do this valuable work (Peters and Pearce, 2012).

Recommendations for practice and research

Leverage professional development

The theory of teacher resilience proposes that teachers need opportunities to foster individual and collective resilience to endure professional challenges. Time is precious, and self-care is the last item on the to-do list. Using department meetings to conduct focus groups afforded teachers a chance to pause, check in with their feelings, reconnect with their purpose and honor each other’s stories. Giving teachers time and space to recognize and name their emotions without judgment promoted a sense of resilience. Few professional development opportunities, even those aimed at developing social and emotional skills of students, provide teachers with expertise and opportunity to acknowledge their own emotional journey – and how resilience plays a role in their effectiveness.

Ongoing professional learning experiences should be anchored in growth mindset, as it represents a core internal enabling factor on the situational map to offset burnout. As an optimistic perspective and growth mindset can be developed (Dweck, 2016; Seligman, 2006), professional learning experiences that help teachers build awareness and skills to facilitate resilience across the teaching career are recommended (as in BRITE, https://www.brite.edu.au/).

Build communities of resilience

A primary aspect of teacher resilience is staying grounded in why teachers chose this profession. Teachers need to articulate their “why” and come back to it at the start and end of every year. A collective “why” can be developed at department, building and district levels. The role of community in building and maintaining teacher resilience was most evident across focus groups. Johnson and Down (2013) argue against an individualistic notion of resilience and posit that dynamic and complex interactions among colleagues within a school setting shape individual teacher’s thoughts, beliefs, actions and behaviors. Interventions designed at fostering teacher resilience need to equally emphasize individual factors and sociocultural factors to create school environments where teachers feel heard, seen, supported, valued – and that they belong.
The participants highlighted the importance of their sense of community with and without strong leadership. In difficult times, teachers’ commitment was as much to each other as to the job, illustrating relational resilience. It may be this sense of belonging that allows teachers to overcome fight, flight and freeze responses to their everyday challenges and instead face their challenges as possibilities for new learning and growth. Work done on trauma-informed classrooms emphasizes the vital role that belonging, connection and nurturing play to help students be available for learning (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2005), arguably the case for teachers as well. These researchers argue that teachers who do not feel a sense of belonging, a purposeful connection or at least a minimal degree of nurturing will not stay in the profession long enough to develop agency.

**Further research**

Next steps include expanding the focus group samples to include elementary, other secondary disciplines and special education teachers, as well as teachers of color, LGBTQ teachers and teachers from other states to refine the theory. A survey instrument will be developed to gather data from a stratified random sample of teachers across the USA. Despite robust international evidence, there is a dearth of US studies exploring teacher resilience. Additional research is needed to continue to explore the role of resilience in teacher retention and effectiveness and to distinguish resilience from related constructs. The researchers’ ultimate goal of this line of inquiry is to develop research-based professional development programs to support teachers in building resilience across their careers.

**Unique contributions of this study**

This study extends the literature base in several ways. First, this study and its emerging theory confirms and extends robust international research findings within a US context. Second, the situational map extends the work of Mansfield et al. (2012, 2016) and Sullivan and Johnson (2012) to visually depict the complexity of the dynamic interplay of internal, external, constraining and enabling factors to explain how resilience is mediated by efficacy and ideally leads to agency. Third, this study moves away from a deficit model of teachers’ shortcomings in addressing issues of burnout and retention and offers a framework for addressing teacher stress, burnout and attrition through a proactive approach to support teachers in our schools. Fourth, the focus group methodology provided an unexpected first stage of intervention in supporting teacher resilience. Focus groups served to therapeutically provide teachers a collective opportunity to listen and provide emotional support to each other, to engender task appreciation of their work, to share common experience through reality confirmation and also to break down the dichotomy of personal and professional challenges, all of which were resilience-building (Papatrainou and LeCornu, 2014).

Finally, researchers present a roadmap for building teacher resilience as a precursor to teacher agency, which is a missing element in many social emotional learning (SEL) initiatives. Teachers value an emphasis on SEL in their classrooms, but a recent national survey (Schwartz, 2019) indicates that teachers feel unprepared to implement SEL programs and support students’ significant social and emotional needs. Furthermore, some researchers have found that teachers who are mandated to teach SEL, but do not cultivate their own social emotional wellness practice, can actually worsen their students’ SEL outcomes (Reyes et al., 2012). Thus, this emerging theory of teacher resilience offers an “inside-out” approach specifically designed by teachers for teachers to build resilience and agency necessary to positively and effectively influence students’ SEL outcomes, rather than many “outside in” therapeutic programs that teachers may not feel fit their unique contextual needs.
The results from these initial focus groups with English language arts teachers in one northeastern state comprise a propositional theory of teacher resilience. With a small sample skewed to more veteran teachers, yielding an inability to generalize the findings, further investigation is recommended. Important to note, of our sample of 33 teachers, two have because left the profession entirely and one has left the classroom for an administrative role. This speaks to the volatility of the balance between enabling and constraining factors and to the importance of supporting teachers’ resilience across the career span.

References


Further reading


About the authors

Sally Valentino Drew (PhD) has worked in public education for 20 years. She is an Associate Professor of Special Education and Interventions at Central Connecticut State University. The goal of her research is to improve literacy outcomes for adolescent learners through intervention research, teacher preparation and professional development. Teacher resilience is an emerging area of inquiry; she has embedded work on teacher resilience into preservice teacher education for the past ten years. Dr Drew has served as a literacy consultant for many districts in the region. She is a certified elementary teacher, with additional teaching experience at the preschool-, middle- and high-school levels. Sally Valentino Drew is the corresponding author can be contacted at: drewsav@ccsu.edu

Cathy Sosnowski is currently a retired English teacher and administrator; she is an adjunct faculty member in the Master of Arts in Teaching program at Central Connecticut State University. Cathy Sosnowski has worked in public education for 36 years. She has been a teacher, department coordinator, department chair, assistant principal, assistant principal of teaching and learning and a director of curriculum, instruction, assessment for secondary English and social studies. She is an active member in the New England Association of Teachers of English, as well as serving as the president of the CT Council of Teachers of English. Cathy has spent the past five years working with teachers to create trauma-informed classrooms and teacher self-care. Currently, Cathy works as an Adjunct Professor at CCSU in the MAT program.

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com