

Exploring teachers' resilience amidst workplace adversities, in a South African context

Abstract

Despite volumes of research work on resilience internationally, much remains unknown about the adversities and resilience among teachers in South Africa. It was envisaged that the findings of this study would make it possible for strength-based, resilience-focused interventions to be developed in order to support teachers and prevent staff turnover. A qualitative research was used to discover a multiple voice of teachers through semi-structured interviews. The findings taken from the seven participants' narratives were categorised. The study documented individual and environmental processes that enabled teachers to function resiliently despite the adversities they face at work. The findings of the research established that teachers attributed their ability to thrive amid workplace adversity ultimately through the following factors: personal resilience, support from their families and community, professional assistance, religious practices and beliefs as well as seminars and workshops.

Keywords: workplace adversity, resilience, teacher resilience, risk factors, protective factors

Introduction

Retaining teachers is a major issue of concern in many countries. To teach and to teach at one's best over time has always required resilience. Teacher resilience is relatively a recent area of investigation which provides a way of understanding what enables teachers to persist in the face of workplace adversity. The previous chapter provided an introduction and background to the study. This chapter will explore and provide an overview of the resilience phenomenon in more detail.

Resilience is relatively novel and decidedly complex concept (Theron & Theron, 2010:3) that is defined as a person's ability to bounce back after experiencing adversity (Ungar, 2011:2). According to Wright (2013:25), resilience is the ability to use social-emotional skills to overcome the effects of stress. In one study of teachers and resilience, the definition developed was the 'process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Pearce & Morrison, 2011:48).

This makes resilience a process of doing well amid risk and adversity. It is not surprising that there are only a few studies that have examined how teachers understand resilience or how they would describe resilient teachers (Mansfield, Beltman & McConney, 2012:359). Despite the vast body of research on resilience, there is little agreement on a single definition of resilience among scholars. Masten (2013:227) and Ungar (2011:7) argue convincingly that resilience is a common phenomenon among individuals that result from the effective operation of the basic human adaptation system, and when protected and in good working order, development can be robust even in the face of severe adversity.

Literature review

Although resilience among children has been well studied by researchers from multiple disciplines, there is little empirical work on resilience in teachers (Gu & Day, 2013:25). Teacher resilience provides a way of understanding what enables teachers to persevere in the face of challenges (Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011:3). The nature of resilience is determined by the interaction between the internal assets of the teacher and the external environments in which the teacher lives and works (Gu & Day, 2013:30).

Research into teacher resilience had identified confidence as a factor (Gu & Day, 2013:31; Mansfield *et al.*, 2012:360). Yet teachers continue to exit the system. This confidence can have two aspects: confidence in their capacity to teach and in their ability to take risks (Mansfield, Beltman, Price & McConney, 2012:361). According to Raath and Hay (2016:5), internal assets refer to teachers' confidence that they are able to implement effective classroom management strategies, employ instructional strategies and can engage learners effectively; external aspects pertains to a school environment which includes support from colleagues and management.

Initially, the term resilience was used to explain the capacity of individuals to adapt and thrive despite experiencing adversity (Garmezy, 1974:88; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). However, it has been subsequently shown that resilience is not solely a personal attribute, but a complex construct resulting from a dynamic relationship between risk and protective factors (Benard & Walton, 2011:27). Later on, resilience was described as the ability to bounce back from some form of disruption, stress or change (Boyden, 2009:127; Santos, 2012:223) with the emphasis on how an individual managed to be resilient (Killian, 2004:42; Luthar *et al.*, 2000:543).

Thereafter resilience was seen as both a dynamic process which encompassed positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Brooks, 2006:71; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000:543; Rutter, 1999:135) and the product of the person-environment interactions (Schoon, 2006:6; Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Othman, Kwong, Armstrong & Gilgun, 2007:288). More recently from the ecological view (Masten, 2012:364) saw the resilience phenomenon as positive or effective functioning in adverse circumstances. Resilience in individuals was regarded as an ecological phenomenon that develops the interaction or transaction that occur within environments and systems such as families, schools, neighbours and workplace (Brooks, 2006:70). The study adopted Ungar's (2011:13) definition of resilience being a person's ability to bounce back after experiencing adversity with new force and showing personal growth. Resilience is therefore both a process of an individual's navigation towards, and the capacity of one to negotiate for, health resources on their own terms (Ungar, 2011:9).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore resilience amidst workplace challenges among teachers in the Lejweleputswa district. In the end, it was envisaged that the findings of this study contribute to it possible for strength-based, resilience-focused interventions to be developed in order to support teachers and prevent staff turnover.

Methodology

This research study employed a qualitative research design which purported to explore teachers' experiences of workplace resilience against workplace adversities. Fouche and Schurink (2011:309) explain that this approach assumes that reality should only be construed through the meaning that the participants assign to their "lifeworld". When applied to this study, the objective of interpretivism is to provide a perspective on teachers' resilience, to analyse participants' experience and give insight regarding how he or she makes sense of this phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2013:60). Therefore, the phenomenon of teacher resilience was presented as perceived by through the eyes of the teachers. A purposive sample of 7 teachers was undertaken (4 females and 3 male). Participants were able to share their experiences in focus groups and/or through personal documents, such as emails, journal entries and grievance letters, as is suggested by Anderson (2013:21) and Creswell (2013:10) as well as Smith and Osborn (2009:57).

Data are those pieces of information or facts (attitude, behaviour and motivation) that any situation gives to an observer (Blumberg *et al.*, 2014:482; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010:88). The study asked for a very comprehensive response; thus, focus groups were most likely to provide the depth of information that would be useful (Harrel & Mellisa, 2009:10). Bless *et al.* (2013:183) and Blumberg *et al.* (2014:213) define interview as a data collection technique based on a series of questions relating to the research topic to be answered by the research participants. Data was analysed thematically. Numeration was used as it indicates the number of times the emergent themes occur in the transcripts (Smith *et al.*, 2009:98). Smith *et al.* (2009:98) and Viasmorandi *et al.* (2016:101) suggest that this strategy can be a way in which the relevant significance of some emergent themes could be indicated. In this study, a theme was identified when a certain idea or experience was highlighted by at least two participants in the group (De Vos, 2013:80). Research is conducted within ethical bounds. In this study, the researchers solicited permission from the Department of Education and ethical clearance from the University's Ethical Committee. Ethical issues in research fall in one of four categories, namely the participants' rights to human dignity, privacy, confidentiality, protection from harm and informed consent were observed at all times as suggested by Babbie, (2010:80); Leedy & Ormrod, (2010:101); Strydom *et al.*, (2011:15) and Terre Blanche, (2007:56).

Findings and discussion

This section describes the common themes that emerged from the data. These themes reflect teachers' responses to the interview questions posed to them. Teachers' responses individually and collectively portray the environmental factors that contributed to them being resilient, despite all the adversities. The five themes that emerged from the teachers' responses were: personal resilience; family and community; professional assistance; religion; further studying and seminars or workshops.

Theme1: Personal resilience

The underlying mental struggles and coping strategies of teachers were personal resources that influence the ways in which they dealt with their workplace adversities. These resources are presented next as the underlying teachers' efforts to manage the unpleasant emotions and mental struggles associated with workplace adversity. Resource mentioned included being positive, determination, competitiveness, commitment, maturity and persistence amongst others. Some teachers made mention of their mental and physical toughness as helping them to get through their workplace adversities.

The love and passion that these teachers have for teaching are amazing. As this is another instrument in their successful response to adversity.

I have learnt to overcome most of the adversities by exercising regularly and eating healthy to improve my health. Well, I will not give up now. Quitting my job is not now, because I know I am going to be successful one day.

This supports the findings of (Larsen and Murray-Davis, 2005:24; Becky & Bobek, 2010:203) that healthy diet promotes weight loss and reduces the risk of chronic diseases.

We try to maintain a positive attitude during difficult times at work. We also try to communicate whatever difference we may have with some of our colleagues as a way of dealing with adversity.

Hooper (2009:21) wrote the importance of positive interaction with colleagues during times of adversity. It is evident from the above that a positive attitude can help build bridges between conflicting points of view.

You see all of us here are members of a teacher's group on Facebook where we get to share our experiences online with some teachers in the Diaspora.

This finding confirms the work of Baym (2010;134) who suggests that social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups are primarily a means for relationship maintenance.

It emerged from the findings that the listening and emotional support that all the teachers received from their families and friends, showed that they really cared and were sympathetic and provided space for teachers to debrief and discuss work-related adversities.

My husband just listens and encourages me that nothing is simple and that it is like that everywhere.

I try to organise myself and all the resources that I need. I manage my time I even drafted myself a timetable. I try very hard to be nice and to be easily approachable to my colleagues. The first year is very difficult of course. For now, I am planning to stay in this profession and see where it leads me.

This is an indication that some teachers are willing to accept new challenges while demonstrating their resilience.

Theme2: Family and community

Family are the members that share a place of residence or related through blood ties or legal contracts.

The interviews revealed that all the teachers their spouses are very supportive and understanding. Throughout the interview teachers consistently articulated that the support that they get from their families encouraged, motivated and pushed them to excel in their work despite the adversities.

My family really cared for me a lot and they provided me with space to discuss work challenges. My family is always there when I needed to talk about things that are bothering me.

Initially, Rifkin, Muller and Bichmann (1988:935) and Gabb (2010:465) define community as a group of people living in the same defined area sharing the same basic values, organisations and interests. Later, White (1982:23) defined community as an informal organised social entity, which is characterised by a sense of identity. Thereafter, Manderson, Valencia and Thomas (1992:33) defined community as a population which is geographically focused, but which also exists as a discrete social entity, with a local collective identity and corporate purpose.

Teachers also felt appreciated when the parents of their learners gave them positive feedback about the impact they were having on their children. This is illustrative as most of the teachers were saying:

Some parents do come and visit us at school and tell us that they are happy so far about the progress of their learners (smiling). The support that I get from both my parents is amazing I must say.

Some teachers said:

We play a very essential role in our communities as well in community planning and resilience building, where we make sure that cultural and faith-based sensitivity is built, because I for one believe if our communities can be resilient then it will be easy for us teachers as to be resilient too.

Some teachers further noted that:

We try to develop partnerships and collaborations with existing communities' organisations, the non-profit service organisations.

It evident from the above that teachers, in order to deal with adversities, go the extra mile of providing community education and training on diversity, tolerance and respect to professional associations, schools and others. This is shown when teachers 6 agrees:

I contact representatives of each sector in the community and offer programmes on cultural competence and diversity; these programmes also allow us time for discussions of resilience and preparedness.

Theme3: Professional assistance

Smith and Ingersoll (2004:683) and Bayer, Grossman and DuBois (2014:410) state that mentoring is the personal guidance provided, usually by seasoned veterans, to beginning teachers in schools. Similarly, Kremer and Cooper (2014:415) define mentoring as a process by which an experienced or knowledgeable individual aids a less expert individual.

Most novice teachers note that the induction and the mentoring activities by more experienced teachers helped them to be resilient.

Professional networking with other colleagues from different places and schools helps us to deal with other challenges that may be at work.

The mentoring programmes helped some us novice teachers a lot, as we view it as a tool for our human resource development. Our mentors taught us about the school policies and procedures. So that really made us to adapt easily.

School orientation also helped me a big deal because I knew what was expected of me, when and where to start.

During my first-year last year I could not cope due to the amount work that I had to deal with, but the reduction of that workload helped me, teacher further noted that *observing experienced teachers also helped me to be resilient.*

I also deal with adversities by planning my work on time and I don't miss the chance to attend workshops as I am working on improving my professional development.

I can cope with whatever challenge because of the support that I get from some of my colleagues. Every day after school hours there is a colleague of mine with whom I share everything with. The most important thing that makes us to be more resilient is when our learners will come back to us and say, teacher, we really enjoyed the lesson today. Many teachers expressed the enjoyment they gained from developing interpersonal connection with their learners and ensuring that the learners feel safe and welcome in their classroom.

This supports the finding building relationships with learners (Castro *et al.*, 2010:625; Hirschhorn, 2009:211; and in turn this can increase teachers' motivation and commitment towards their work (Day & Gu, 2014:4431; Kitching, Morgan & O'Leary, 2009:51; Zorzella, Muller & Cribbie, 2015:175).

Most teachers agreed:

We feel a sense of accomplishment and pride when our learners, especially those who are struggling academically, show outstanding improvements in their learning.

It is evident from the that learner success is the most influential form of encouragement that seemed to aid the resilience of teachers. This supports the similar findings from other studies that have found that

student engagement, achievement and success can enhance teacher resilience (Kitching, Morgan & O'Leary, 2009:47; Swars Meyer, Mays & Lack, 2009:170; Zorzella, Muller & Cribbie, 2015:176; Gabi, 2015:2). Teacher 5 mentioned the following:

When I get sick, I don't waste time I consult my doctor immediately. I really don't want any complications in my life, because I was diagnosed with stress, teaching consumes all my energy.

It is widely acknowledged that teachers are able to cope with workplace adversity if they experience a positive school culture that is collaborative and where teachers support each other, display trust and openness (Aelterman, Engels, Van Petegem & Verhaeghe, 2007:287; Flores and Day, 2006:227; Gu and Day, 2013:33). Despite the many unpleasant and difficult circumstances that the teachers encountered most of them noted that they obtained benefits from dealing with adversities at work. Some of the teachers learned a lot from their experiences of adversities as they continued to say: Teacher1 mentioned:

We have learned valuable lessons from our past experiences with adversities at work. Now we can stand in front of our learners in confidence and motivate them. We learnt how to deal with problems at work in a more mature and humble way. Now some of us are busy exploring other avenues for future as some of us are not intending to stay longer in this profession.

Theme5: Religion

Mani (2012:162) asserts that the primordial function of religion and spiritual tradition is providing or restoring a triple linkage or union, namely a union of the individual with themselves, a union with other humans, and a union with God. Initially, Sinnott (2001:199) defines religion as practices and beliefs related to a dogma system and add that religion may be an external sign of a spiritual orientation. Later, Pargament (2002:240) defined religion as a search for significance in ways related to the sacred. "Sacred" refers not only to the divine, higher powers, and God, but to qualities that are closely linked to the divine, such as holiness, blessedness, transcendence, omnipotence, and infinitude (Pargament, 2002:240). Thereafter, Henle and Hogler (2004:157) added a moral element in their definition of religion and define religion as moral or ethical beliefs as to what is right and wrong, which are sincerely held, with the strength of traditional religious views.

It is worth mentioning that hope, perseverance and religiosity were resilience resources that enabled resilience in teachers. Religion is one of the most distinctive human phenomena which can be of individual and community growth, strength, social solidarity and resilience (Abu-Raiya, 2015:133). While on the other hand spirituality can be defined as the quality in human beings who are concerned or preoccupied with higher meaning or purpose in life rather than with affairs of the material world (Slade, 2011:2). This is evident when many of the teachers say something to this effect:

Every day when I wake up in the morning to go to church, I am always full of smile that is how I start my day, leaving all the troubles behind.

My religion taught me to be resilient and to be able to stand for whatever challenge that may come my way.

My religion also serves as a resource of me being resilient because of what we are being taught there. We are taught to be emotionally strong and we also receive inspiration and the spiritual uplift.

Thus, specific religion has certain religious practices and beliefs which are key to the value formation and ethics of the individual member (Mpholo, 2015:17).

Theme6: Seminars or workshops and further studying

The following excerpts are based on the feelings and experiences of teachers of their resilience of workplace related difficulties. Teacher 6 said:

If maybe the Department of Education can workshop us on many things instead of focusing only on the academics maybe our resilience as teachers would develop.

Most teachers agreed that in some workshops learned to set up their classrooms to achieve a good working space, but other teachers further noted that:

We try to establish behavioural boundaries within our classrooms, but sometimes it is difficult.

I for one believe that workshops can be very effective in terms of mentoring us teachers, as they offer support in terms of subject development and transfer knowledge, not only this, but they must include other programmes such as resilience strategies for teachers and we must attend these workshops with our programme heads.

Some teachers highlighted that:

We also try to establish a positive, bright cheerful and inviting environment in our classrooms and in the staffroom with our colleagues.

It is evident from the above that teachers identified specific experiences, qualities and ideas that help them to be resilient. It is also evident that teachers are aware that it is important for all the stakeholders to work together to achieve the skill of being resilient.

It would be very nice if the Department of Education can organise workshops that will focus on the well-being of teachers and teaching us more strategies of being resilient. We would really appreciate that. One of the teachers was emphasising this. Others were agreeing.

The teachers saw the importance of maintaining study, professional development and training. Most teachers acknowledged that being organised and planning for your lessons daily also made their work

easier. This is another strategy they use to be resilient. This finding confirms an earlier finding by McDonald (2010:25) that one of the best ways to lower the amount of stress you deal with daily, is to be prepared. He goes on to say that some of the preparations require organisation. Preparation is absolutely the key to be a successful teacher (McDonald, 2010:25). He further states that the more thought and effort you put into your lessons and your job, the better you will be. You will also be less stressed throughout the year.

Most teachers agreed that:

throughout our studying, we have learnt work within the school policy so as to avoid a lot of irregularities and having to account more and it helps us a lot to avoid committing a lot of errors that would have been committed when we were working without the school policy.

One teacher said managing our personal time, setting priorities and avoiding work overload, is another strategy that I am applying to deal with adversity. According to **Teacher 4**, *some challenges are difficult to overcome. All we must do is just hope for the best. When it comes to teaching material, we use anything that we find in the school.* **Teacher 2** added that *we, as teachers, must be creative and use waste material. We must try to be councillors.* **Teacher 4** further noted that *we try to educate parents about their children.* Previous research showed that government subsidy allocated to schools is not enough for them to teach and ensure learners achieve the set outcomes. Learners struggle to do projects because of lack of resources (Mphojane, 2011:69).

Conclusion

For years teaching researchers have been concerned with the antecedents and processes associated with adverse circumstances such as stress, bullying and low wages in teaching. Little research has focused on teachers' resilience in response to workplace adversity.

The primary aim of the study was to explore workplace adversity and resilience among teachers in the Lejweleputswa district and the need for support programmes for teachers.

In this chapter, semi-structured focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used to collect data regarding workplace adversity and resilience of teachers in township schools. From the information gathered, it emerged that teachers do face workplace adversity and most of the teachers do show some characteristics of being resilient, while others still need much assistance in terms of being resilient.

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