

Teacher Resiliency: Nature or Nurture?

David S. Benders
310 College Street
Educational Studies Unit
Union College
Barboursville, KY 40906, USA

Flodonna A. Jackson
DeKalb County Schools
PO Box 311844
Atlanta, GA 31131, USA

Abstract

This analysis of previous research and data is designed to explore the idea of teacher retention issues that are a major area of concern within the K-12 educational system. This paper will offer a new direction to studying the issue of teacher retention by exploring whether the resiliency in teachers is a part of the nature versus nurture argument. The findings suggest that teacher resiliency is a personal, internally developed characteristic that fosters an optimistic view of teaching and learning that results in a teacher “sticking with it” regardless of the challenges faced each academic year. It is anticipated that this paper will impart new knowledge to the reader and initiate subsequent research that will aim at identifying the specific personality trait that one may need to exhibit perseverance in the field of K-12 education.

Keywords: resiliency, retention, nature, nurture

Purpose

Teachers who are most qualified and academically superior appear to be most likely to leave the teaching profession (Murnane, R. & Pauly, E. 1988; Darling-Hammond, 1984). More research on the topic of teacher retention found teachers who expressed dissatisfaction with working conditions, salary level, lack of support from administration and peers, lack of respect, and limited opportunities for advancement were major reasons for leaving the profession (Murnane, R. & Pauly, E. 1988). Other reasons not directly related to teacher resiliency may include using a career in education to jumpstart other career paths as well as those significant differences in opportunities for employment outside the teaching field. Higher attrition occurs in such teaching fields as math and science (Murnane, R. & Pauly, E. 1988).

There are several articles that include and discuss teachers' induction process and how it improves teachers' success rates. According to the Recruiting New Teacher or RNT in 1999-2000, seven states have induction programs mandated with funding, 10 states have mandates without funding, 10 states have funding but no mandates. According to researchers being a mentor is the most crucial component of the induction program and for teachers, also the most beneficial. Overall, the research reports that beginning teachers who have had a mentor in their first year of teaching feel more prepared and are more likely to continue teaching.

In a study of induction programs, 75% of participants revealed they would see themselves teaching five years compared to 25% of non-participants. In contrast to earlier research, studies have shown that new teachers are most likely to leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. It was not clear what other factors may have contributed to teachers leaving the profession. This statement means to us that teachers who participated in an induction program were more likely to stay in the teaching field than those whom did not participate in an induction program.

How do we define a successful or an effective teacher? This is the one billion dollar question facing teachers and administrators today. The role of the teacher is multifaceted.

Teachers also must serve the role of parent, nurse, administrator, manager, counselor, lawyer and sometimes even a law enforcement officer. Serving in each of these roles, sometimes simultaneously, qualifies teachers as being effective. The role of a teacher is so much more than what is often perceived by the general public.

A secondary focus of an effective teacher is a defined role of one who can teach. The major emphasis is on the teacher's role as an instructor; and successful teachers are identified as those who provide good instruction. Because teachers have various roles in addition to instruction, teachers' stress levels and ability to be resilient can constantly be in flux. However, this research will explore the notion that successful teachers are characterized as experiencing low stress, showing no symptoms of burnout, and reporting high job satisfaction (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Ludtke, and Baumert, 2008).

Another billion dollar question is: are successful, effective teachers made or born? The effectiveness of a teacher is contingent upon several factors that support teacher success. Pre-service teachers are assumed to have the innate desire to be teachers. They must obtain the proper preparation through up-to-date pedagogy. A first year teacher must receive support from administration and colleagues to enhance student achievement. It has not been an easy attempt to prepare our new teachers for the challenge of teacher stress that is resulting in a large number of teachers leaving the profession (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Teacher stress is a phenomenon that is challenging the fabric of education as the shortage of effective teachers is causing a national concern. Throughout the nation, school districts are challenged to recruit and retain teachers in general and effective teachers specifically (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).

Define Teacher Stress

Howard & Johnson (2004) defined teacher stress as the negative feeling or emotions associated with the work related to the profession. "The unpleasant feelings may involve anger, tension, frustration or depression and are generally perceived as constituting a threat to self esteem or well-being" (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 400). Our working definition of teacher stress is paraphrased from this definition. The literature reviewed found a relationship between teacher stress levels and teachers leaving the profession (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). Howard & Johnson stated "A major goal of pre-professional teacher preparation must become the development of resiliency. Sustaining resiliency becomes the continued joint role of teacher education programs and continuing education programs both of which determine the quality of education a teacher receives" (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001, p. 4).

Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) investigated Florida's special education teacher attrition issues through a large-scale survey and found specific variables involved in decisions of teachers to leave the special education classroom and one variable was their perceptions of high stress. The inconclusive results from the study explained the idea behind a person's self-perception of what defines stress levels that would influence one's decision to leave. Miller, Brownell, and Smith's (1999) research did offer the necessary influence to this study indicating that the variable of stress must be considered when exploring resiliency in teachers.

Resiliency is defined by variables associated with the individual: tenacity, optimism and impact, competence, belonging, and usefulness. Competence: can be achieved by teacher preparation programs and professional development; Tenacity: willingness to keep trying in the face of setbacks; Optimism: belief in the probability of success; Impact: commitment to standards; Belonging: the feeling that you are a part of the vision of the group; Usefulness: necessity of a sense of initiative, industriousness, and involvement (doing without being told).

Background

Nurture: Resilient Teachers

Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) also suggest that teachers can be taught resiliency through frequent, successful interactions with qualified teachers and administrators, interactive teaching and teaching responsibilities during the student teaching practicum with repeated real-life classroom experiences; and, of course, having high expectations. All of these experiences, according to Bernshausen and Cunningham (2000) and Sagor (1996) teach teachers to have competence. This theory of competence differs from the general consensus that teachers' competence is just their ability to teach students the curriculum. In order for teachers to be resilient they must actively belong to organizations and committees, not just be members (Bernshausen and Cunningham, 2001). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs indicates that people have a sense of needing to belong.

There are many learning and professional opportunities that teachers have in which they can belong to such as professional organizations, school committees, and collegiality.

Having competence and a sense of belonging may reduce teachers' levels of stress because the teachers are able to learn from their colleagues and share the responsibilities of teaching. Heavy workloads and long working hours can contribute to high stress levels, but resilient teachers who work cooperatively can promote belonging through teamwork thus reducing stress (Bernshausen and Cunningham, 2001).

Teachers thrive in working conditions that have strong, supportive administration, faculty, and staff; good working facilities; high collegiality, and the ability to make cooperative decisions about the workings of the school and curriculum and instruction. These same scenarios also reduce teachers' stress levels (Ascher, 1991; Hammond & Onikama, 1997; Billingsley, 1993). Favorable work conditions increase teachers' willingness to stay in teaching because their stress level is minimized (Billingsley, 1993).

Teacher resiliency can be maintained through formal mentor support, reasonable teaching assignments, and quality professional development (Ryel, Bernshausen, & van Tassell, 2002; Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001; Holloway, 2003). Resilient teachers know that: they are a part of a professional learning community; professional learning is at the core of teaching; they are accountable to all stakeholders; and they must have a broad knowledge base (Bartlett, 200).

Strong teacher preparation programs prepare teachers for the real-world of teaching including becoming resilient and these programs may cause teachers to stay in teaching because teachers will have lower stress levels (Billingsley, 1993). Shen (1997) believes that resiliency can be taught through the creation of career ladders. Career ladders allow for differentiated salaries and more influence over school and teaching policies (Holloway, 2003). Resilient teachers are empowered teachers and perform well on career ladders (Shen, 1997 and Holloway, 2003).

Nature: Resilient Teachers

Support that resilient teachers are born include research from Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) which state that resilient teachers have an innate set of personal values that were present before they became teachers. Resilient teachers believe that their only job is to help students improve academically and that students are not to be blamed for their academic short falls (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004; Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001).

Resilient teachers make sure that they have up-to-date professional learning even if they have to fund it themselves (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004). Quality professional learning is essential to quality education. All teachers whether novice or veteran need a professional learning community where they can receive and give advice to colleagues with the opportunity to rest, reflect, and recover (Cherniss, 1995). Teacher stress is not limited to either novice or veteran teachers. Both novice and veteran teachers can have feelings of being inadequate or ineffective thus affecting student achievement and increased stress levels (Benjamin, 1987). A professional learning-sharing community can give these individuals an opportunity to share and be evaluated by colleagues. Being able to receive evaluation from colleagues can help minimize the amount of stress teachers feel because they realize they are not alone with their feelings and understandings, and thus building their resiliency (Jepson & Forrest, 2006; McEwen & Thompson, 1997).

Resilient teachers have an optimistic outlook toward education in general and teaching specifically. Resilient teachers are problem solvers and change agents (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004; Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). When teachers feel that they have control over their work, then their stress level is decreased. Some teachers may suffer from stress because of the amount of work they need to do in relation to the amount of control they have on the work they have to do (Feij & Taris, 2004). For example, Karasek's job-demand-control model is illustrated in Figure 1 (Feij & Taris, 2004; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) to explain how the amount of control on the job determines that amount of demand the employee feels:

Demand	High demand Low control	High demand High control	Control
	Low demand Low control	Low demand High control	

Figure 1: Interpretation of job-demand model illustrating the four categories employees can fit into.

Having high demand and high control within a job setting means that the teachers are able to deal with the job demands because they have control over their job (Feij & Taris, 2004; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Within this scenario, teachers will feel that they can be productive by ensuring student achievement because they have control over what and how they are teaching. Also, because teachers who fall into the category of high demand/high control have control over what they do at work; they are better able to handle additional job-related stress. Having high demand and high control within a job setting means that the teachers are able to deal with the job demands because they have control over how they do their job (Feij & Taris, 2004; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Long 1995). Figure 1 suggests that teachers who have high demand and high control are inevitably resilient teachers because they have control over what they have to accomplish.

Conversely, teachers who experience low demand/high control have low stress levels because not only do they have low demands on them for their job, but they have high control over what or even if they teach (Feij & Taris, 2004; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Long, 1995). These teachers are also resilient because they are relatively stress-free.

Findings

The Higher Education Research Institution, University of California (LA) The American Freshman National Norms Annual Report illustrated that US National Center for Education Statistics reported that from 1970 to 2007, college freshmen who declared academic majors in the field of education were 8.4 percent of the survey population in 1970, with a slight increase to 9.2 percent in 2007 (*U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2009*). The importance of this information leads to a baseline of the number of potential teachers in the field of education. The slight increase in the number of declared majors substantiates the continuation of potential teachers into the field of education. The education field is being replenished with future teachers, but the teachers are not staying in the field. The data is reported as 2,386.5 represent 2,386,500.

Table 1 illustrates the challenge of teacher resiliency and professionals leaving the field. Table 1 offers data to better explore the premise of this research study. Despite the reports of a slight increase in students majoring in education, we find a continued flow of teachers leaving the profession for an eclectic number of reasons. The frightening conclusion from this report is that there was an increase in *leavers* of the profession from 1988-89 school year as compared to the 2004-05 year. The leavers more than double in the public school as compared to the private school. Yet, on a positive note, we can see a constant decline in the attrition of public school teachers based on years of experience.

Table 1: Teacher Stayers, Movers, and Leavers 1988-89 and 2004-05

Characteristics Number (1,000)	Public				Private			
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Stayers</i>	<i>Movers</i>	<i>Leavers</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Stayers</i>	<i>Movers</i>	<i>Leavers</i>
1988-89	2,386.5	2,065.8	188.4	132.3	311.9	242.5	29.7	39.7
2004-05	3,214.9	2,684.2	261.1	269.6	465.3	374.6	27.6	63.1
Full-time teaching experience:	Intention- ally left blank?							
No Full-time Teaching Experience	100.0	63.3	17.1	19.6	100.0	73.6	4.0	22.3
1 to 3 years' experience	100.0	77.1	14.8	8.1	100.0	71.0	10.1	18.9
4 to 9 years experience	100.0	82.7	9.4	7.9	100.0	77.2	6.7	16.1
10 to 19 years experience	100.0	88.2	6.3	5.5	100.0	88.3	3.8	7.8
20 years or more years experience	100.0	84.9	3.9	11.2	100.0	89.7	3.3	7.0

Note. Data from Table 245. "U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2009*," (128th Edition) Washington, DC, 2008

It can be deduced from the data in Table 1 that if we can get teachers to become resilient, then they will continue to teach.

In Table 2, the illustration depicts the reasons for teachers moving and leaving their current school. Movers are teachers who were still teaching in the current school year but had moved to a different school after the 2003-2004 school year. Leavers are teachers who left the teaching profession after the 2003-04 school year. This data is based on the school and staffing survey administered by the US National Center for Education Statistics, 2007. The data is reported in percent of the total respondents.

The data found that the higher percentages were specifically related to the dissatisfaction with functions within the job. At the highest reported rate, a better teaching assignment supports the idea of seniority. Veteran teachers are given options of teaching assignments and often select the lesser challenging opportunities which would leave the new teachers with difficult teaching assignments. With over thirty-eight percent of the respondents reporting dissatisfaction with the teaching assignment, clearly one can assume the respondents desire to stay in the field, but desire a better teaching assignment.

Further exploration into the data demonstrates the challenge in education across both private and public schools. Interestingly, over forty-six percent of teachers in the private school moved to another school due to better safety and benefits concerns. This important notation further supports Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, that safety and security level of assurance is vital to one's ability to perform as a teacher.

Table 2: Public and Private School Teachers who moved to a Different School 2004-2005

Reason for Moving	Movers	
	Public	Private
New school is closer to home	26.2	22.8
Better Safety and benefits	16.5	46.4
Higher Job security	19.1	33.4
Opportunity for a better teaching assignment	38.1	33.1
Dissatisfaction with workplace conditions at previous school	32.7	21.4
Dissatisfaction with support from administrators at previous school	37.2	27
Dissatisfaction with changes in job description or responsibilities	18.3	17.5
Laid off or involuntarily transferred	18.7	19.2
Did not have enough autonomy over classroom at previous school	10.4	7.6
Dissatisfaction with opportunities for professional development at previous school	12.8	19.7
Other dissatisfaction with previous school	31.2	29.7

Source: US National Center for Education Statistics, *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: results for the 2004-05, Teacher Follow-up Survey, NCES 2007-307, January 2007.*

Table 3, reports findings from the Teacher Follow-up survey of 288,700 respondents as reported by the US National Center for Education Statistics is depicted to offer a clear illustration of the findings. Table 3, identifies the reasons why teachers leave the profession of teaching in both public and private schools. The data support this study and subsequent studies to continue to explore this phenomenon of teacher retention. Table 3 fosters a stronger argument for the personal characteristic of the teacher to be resilient in the face of adversity. Over twenty-five percent of teachers are leaving both public and private education due to personal reasons including a complete dissatisfaction with the teaching profession. The table does not clearly paint a bleak picture of the leavers from the teaching profession until you disaggregate data to see that the highest rate of leavers, other than retirement, are those looking to pursue a position other than teaching which is at over fifty-four percent between public and private school.

Table 3: Public and Private School Teachers who Leave Teaching in 2004-2005

Reason for Leaving	Leavers	
	Public	Private
Change residence	11.2	17.4
Pregnancy or child rearing	18.7	24.6
Health	11.8	13.2
Retirement	31.4	10.2
Better salary or benefits	14.2	21.8
To pursue a position other than of a k-12 teacher	25.3	29.5
To take courses to improve career opportunities within the field of education	8.9	9.8
To take courses to improve career opportunities outside of field of education	5.3	7.3
Dissatisfied with teaching as a career	14.6	10.8
Dissatisfied with previous school or teaching assignment	16	18.1
Other family or personal reasons	20.4	30.6

Source: US National Center for Education Statistics, *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: results for the 2004-05, Teacher Follow-up Survey, NCES 2007-307, January 2007.*

Table 3 reports findings from the Teacher Follow-up survey of 332, 700 respondents as reported by the US National Center for Education Statistics. Four of the eleven reasons teachers leave teaching, according to Table 3, can be directly related to the lack of resiliency: better salary and benefits (teaching will never make you rich); dissatisfied with teaching as a career; dissatisfied with previous school or teaching assignment; and other family or personal reasons. Resilient teachers are autonomous enough to make decisions about the way they view their career and with a concerted effort work toward changing any feelings of dissatisfaction they may have about their career by sharing with their colleagues their concerns, attending professional development, or reflecting on how to make the situation better.

Conclusion

The data reported support the idea that teacher resiliency may be a nurture versus a nature argument that would lead to new research to identify potential characteristics in teachers that may create programming within school districts and possibly schools of education to target those areas and recruit teachers with characteristics of resiliency to increase retention of teachers.

In conclusion, resilient teachers have lower levels of stress because they have either been properly prepared for teaching or they have an innate perception of competence; they are change agents; they are earnest about professional learning; they thrive on cooperative learning communities with colleagues; and they are empowered. Resilient teachers may be *movers*, but usually are not *leavers*.

Having control over their work situations allows teachers the opportunity to minimize their stress levels. Regardless of whether resilient teachers are made or born, strong teacher preparation programs are essential to maintaining quality, qualified teachers in the classroom. Resilient teachers are necessary for quality education. Today's schools need teachers who are change agents, optimistic, competent, and have a sense of belonging and these are resilient teachers.

The premise of resilient teachers is just like the premise that there are natural born leaders. There are also natural born, effective teachers. Natural born teachers want to teach and have the pedagogy to do so effectively. Because natural born, effective teachers have the desire to teach regardless of the circumstances, these teachers also have: competency, tenacity, optimism, impact, a sense of belonging, and initiative. As Figure 1 illustrates, high control over one's job decreases stress and we can potentially imply that teacher control may increase resiliency. This assertion is not research based but offers additional opportunity to further study on this topic.

This paper offers tremendous new knowledge to the topic of teacher retention and a follow-up study needs to be done to identify the specific characteristics and personal attributes that can contribute to teacher retention. Retaining teachers is a major problem in the overall educational system, as it supports the continuity of educational achievement to develop within schools as the relationship between teachers and students are cultivated. This paper provides a vital first step toward studying teacher retention. It is an attempt to foster new professional development ideas that would help target the identified characteristics that will increase retention and lower teacher stress, especially professional development that supports helping teacher be resilient. Teachers are leaving the field in a mass exodus and the findings reported as to the reasons teachers are leaving are correctable.

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