

# Professional resilience and wellbeing

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**“We should be aspiring to a situation where teachers are encouraged to take ownership of their professional position and wellbeing to ‘thrive in’ rather than simply ‘survive’ the profession”**

As a teacher educator observing the challenges faced by primary student teachers out in schools on teaching placements or on employment-based routes, it is worrying to see that even in their initial year of ‘training’[sic] there are signs of doubt about teaching as a profession; time and time again their resilience and wellbeing is tested. I watch as new entrants struggle with authoritarian regimes in schools that demand accountable performance of them, measured via the output of their pupils. One minute the school wants every pupil to have evidence in their books from a lesson (the rumoured advice for Ofsted visits), and the next a new maths scheme is to be introduced, in the full knowledge (presumably) that there is book monitoring next week. All the while, the phase leader is changing the scheme for reading and there is the pressure of spelling and phonics testing trickling down to pupils to also perform to the test. And so, life in a primary school goes on...

This exercise in plate-spinning, which also includes completing assignments and demonstrating that they are meeting the standards expected to achieve qualified teacher status, leads many of these young graduates to struggle. Their health and work-life balance is often at risk. I work regularly with people perplexed at what they experience as poor leadership and management in schools. They find themselves caught in the trap of wanting to protect their pupils from the consequences of these demands, while feeling the pressure to be compliant and accountable for their actions. Yet they continue to perform at the necessary standard consistently across the year to be accepted into teaching, in the hope that professional status will eventually free them from this incessant performativity. These are moral dilemmas, experienced daily by new teachers who feel torn between maintaining a job and maintaining their professional integrity. These experiences of stress are described by Zukas (2011), as ‘crossing, transitioning, translating’ role-defined boundaries. In essence, they are part of the process by which trainees learn to identify as ‘real’ teachers, but are they necessary?

Once considered part of the classical professions, teachers’ domains of work have traditionally (1) had an orientation towards the promotion of human wellbeing - what I shall term “othering” and will return to later; (2) drawn on a highly-specialised body of knowledge and skills, and (3) been contextualised in relation to concepts of authority and trust (Freidson, 1994). It is easy to see how this definition applies to traditional professionals (doctors, lawyers, priests), and why over time, there have been moves to make the professions more democratic and accountable, including in the field of education. Perhaps uniquely, though, the neoliberal language, values and practices perpetuated by the free-market and competitiveness-at-all costs economy (Apple, 2000, Hursh, 2007) have led to a prevailing policy view of

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teaching as a technical craft, easily learnt on the job, without need to engage with a critical theoretical body of knowledge. There has been a ‘policy turn’ away from ‘a predominant focus on specifying the necessary knowledge for teaching, toward specifying teaching practices that entail knowledge and doing’ (McDonald et al., 2013). Authority and trust have been eroded too, so that with the marketisation of education, students or pupils have become clients, knowledge a commodity to be ‘transferred’ and all sight of the ‘public good’ dismissed in favour of global economic considerations. Biesta (2016) reminds us that turning schools into small businesses distorts what education is about and significantly undermines the ability of teachers to be teachers and of schools, colleges and universities to be educational institutions (p.87).

Still further, externally imposed school accountability systems have become a common element of the UK education system with central government-led policies tied closely to the OECD’s PISA data. With test scores disaggregated to students, teachers and schools, there is evidence that they directly affect the morale of teachers exponentially (Dworkin, 2009). This disaggregation of results frequently means that praise or blame can be ascribed to individual teachers and schools. Underlying assumptions suggesting that low student achievement is a product of incompetent teachers have led to high-stakes accountability initiatives to end failing schools; a narrative of raising teacher ‘quality’ has impacted directly on policy approaches to teacher recruitment, training and curricula, resulting in increases in teacher workloads (Hargreaves, 1994) and what Apple (1987) termed the ‘deskilling’ of teachers. However, to attract high-quality teachers, recruitment drives the promotion of the job as ‘inspirational’, a chance to ‘give something back’ and an effort in social justice (DfE, 2017), while brushing aside the significant everyday challenges teachers face. Despite the rhetoric, the latest figures suggest attracting new teachers into the profession with such promises is not working.

With the tension between what is healthy and sustainable for individual teachers increasingly set against the needs of the institutions they work in, teacher educators must also grapple with resilience’s counter-concept: resistance. The question for my colleagues and me is whether we teacher educators should be seeking to prepare teachers for the way schools are (adapting to institutions) or focus on preparing new professionals for the ways schools could and should be (transforming institutions)?

Evidently, an overemphasis on resistance could leave teachers and teachers-to-be unable to find or hold a position in schools (Ingersoll, 2001). At a time of concerns about teacher retention and sustainability, this is of vital significance. Certainly, there are concerns that the hyper-focus on resilience within international teacher education research and practice is detrimental to both individual teachers and the teaching profession as a whole (MacBeath, 2012). Surely what we want are teachers who can both work in the current teaching profession *and* improve it: this calls for a clarity about how we use the terms ‘resilience and wellbeing’ and requires us to create and engage in opportunities to go beyond the mere replication of practice to a more critical engagement with the *contexts* of practice.

Ratner (2013), drawing from the field of cultural psychology, describes this as a macro–micro

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phenomenon, where conditions that are often perceived to be intra-psychological (e.g. stress and depression) are actually rooted in social and institutional structures and processes. It is evident that already too much focus, responsibility and blame is placed on teacher characteristics, and not enough on the power of the environment, structure and the array of situational factors that impact the work of teachers.

Specifically, teacher burnout and resilience can be viewed from two different perspectives. The clinical (or psychological) approach argues that some teachers have better coping skills or personalities that allow them to resist the negative effects of stress. Burnout is seen as a personal malady resulting from the inability to cope with stress and the stressors associated with the work role. What arises from the tendency to “blame” the victim of burnout is the need to suggest ways to enhance coping skills, offering stress management, holistic health care and even yoga (Celoline, 1982, Pines, 1993). The sociological approach considers how not only structural and organisational variables themselves can serve as stressors to induce burnout, but also that change in structures and organisations may be necessary to promote teacher resilience. If burnout is seen as a form of work role alienation, then ways schools as organisations can mitigate stress and facilitate coping might seem a more strategic response. However, school environments can diminish teachers’ perceived self-efficacy, threatening well-being (Johnson et al., 2014), especially when educational reforms mandate excessive conformity (Alexander, 2011).

When seen as an umbrella term for the ability to bounce back and manage conflicts, adaptability, commitment, flexibility, motivation, positivity and optimism, teacher *resilience* can easily become the goal of teacher retention. However, when over-emphasised by teacher educators and system leaders, this definition can too easily be presented as a set of coping mechanisms to promote wellbeing, while in fact it primarily benefits the institution at the expense of the teacher, leading to unsustainable professional tensions. When resilience is explained as ‘positive adaption despite adversity’ (Bottrell, 2009), almost inevitably, individualised explanations of human problems and their suggested amelioration, as a consequence, lead us to the psychologise and pathologise human problems. For the purpose of this article, I use the definition from Pemberton (2015) who describes resilience in relation to human behaviour as:

“... the capacity to remain flexible in our thoughts, feelings and behaviours when faced by a life disruption, or extended periods of pressure, so that we emerge from difficulty stronger, wiser and more able.” (p.2)

Significantly, here is explicit reference to positive change for the betterment of the individual, as opposed to compliance to the status quo for the needs of the institution.

By contrast, teacher wellbeing can be viewed from both an individual and social perspective. While wellbeing can be associated with an innate desire to reach one’s full potential (Ryan and Deci, 2001), it has also been noted that individual satisfaction and wellbeing can influence others contributing to a more collective, inclusive sense of the concept (ibid). The psychological concept of wellbeing is often accompanied in education by an emphasis on

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physical, emotional, mental and spiritual fulfilment. Mental wellbeing, specifically, is linked to a limited conceptualisation of perceived stimulation in teachers' professional lives.

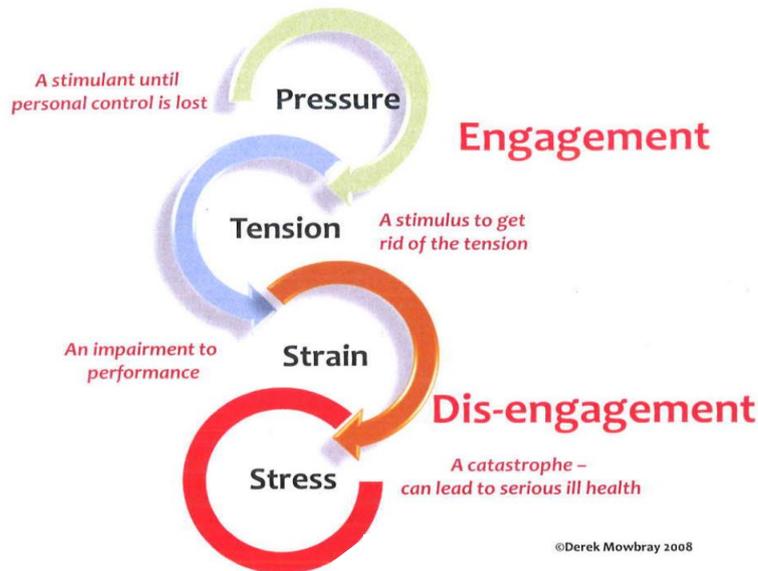


Fig 1. Psychological distress is at the wrong end of deteriorating psychological wellbeing

### The possibilities for teachers and teacher educators

The challenge for teacher educators is *how* to support and promote teacher wellbeing: should they encourage teachers to own their professional responsibilities or support them to manage and cope with them? Often it can feel like suggesting the compartmentalisation of the 'professional' and 'personal' self, which runs the risk of teacher burnout, of physical and emotional exhaustion coupled with a mental distancing from one's professional life. This is relevant to the English context, where educational reform initiatives demand excessive conformity from teachers, supplanting efforts to continually renew the practice of teaching (Alexander, 2011). There is now a plethora of routes into teaching, with a predominance of school-led programmes of ITE. By implication, this means the focus is on inducting a new teacher into a particular school culture and habitus, rather than the teaching profession more generally, as offered by the traditional university routes (Struthers, 2013). Thus, the ultimate determinant of a teacher's success and the implied expectation of a professional educator remain malleability and resilience, while any focus on their work situation is effectively negated. This typically exemplifies instances where 'teachers are expected to manage their professional responsibilities rather than developing their own professional judgement' (Margolis et al., 2014).

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We should be aspiring to a situation where teachers are encouraged to take ownership of their professional position and wellbeing to ‘thrive in’ rather than simply ‘survive’ the profession (Johnson et al., 2010). Underlying this approach is the belief that teachers need to develop their ‘voice’ and to have more agency in their workplace. While there are clinical strategies to support teachers to adopt a sense of agency and to depersonalise negative experiences, which usually involve one-to-one approaches to the development of coping skills, many teacher educators would not be trained for this work; nor does this approach attack the organisational or structural problems that teachers experience in school. More cost effective would be for schools to introduce social support networks and practices that did not stifle teacher enthusiasm. Perhaps changing the measure of school accountability to a more value-added approach rather than using test pass rates could be one approach, especially as we know that some pupils do less well on standardised tests. However, what is obvious is that blaming and holding teachers to account for shortcomings in the learning outcomes of their pupils, ignores the reality that factors outside the control of the schools often exert a significant effect upon pupils’ knowledge acquisition. While teacher educators can support this, ultimately the school as the employing institution may not choose to engage with their workforce in these ways, instead feeling the pressure to put their best teachers with those pupils who are struggling, further impacting on teacher morale.

From Australia, a “Framework of Conditions Supporting Early Career Teacher Resilience” arising from research with new teachers, coordinated from across the continent, offers a refreshing social constructionist approach to resilience, by disrupting and diverting attention away from concerns over early career teachers’ individual problems. Instead it takes a positive view about what it is that enables professional competence to develop, looking at the ‘factors and transactions of individual experience and tracing their constitution in social relations, societal discourse and ideological positions’ (Johnson et al., 2010, p. 533). There is also an explicit challenge to the normative criteria used to assess so-called ‘resilience’ in newly qualified teachers. The framework identifies five themes: (1) Policies and Practices (2) Teachers’ work (3) School Culture (4) Relationships (5) Teacher Identity. Both teacher educators and teachers can therefore contemplate the way a teacher’s reality is located in the context of policy and ideological demands, and framed by teachers’ own moral qualities, which drive their interactions with their pupils.

To understand why this is an important step in the right direction, it is necessary to return here to the idea of “othering” as a fundamental aspect of teaching as a profession. Like healthcare workers, priests and counsellors, the job of teaching involves putting the interest of others at the forefront, scaffolding the learning and development of pupils. Framing teaching in a technocratic context poses a moral challenge to teacher-pupil relationships, and restricts individuals’ ability to make informed professional judgements drawn from research-informed practice. When teacher agency is silenced and, as shown in Fig 1, the stimulant pressure shifts beyond personal control to become an overwhelming stress, not only is it harder to employ individual strategies to solve problems, but even when deployed, they are less effective. Collective practice, through professional learning communities, peer groups, mentoring, coaching and other forms of social networks can offer useful support, and hints at the kind of system within which professionalism in education can thrive.

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In this context, it is evident that school-university partnerships are necessary for the development of a rigorous academic framework to develop innovative programmes of initial teacher education. Such programmes should take as a starting point the link between individual and institutional wellbeing. They must make critical engagement with the very idea of professionalism in education a consistent aim and give more prominence to transition. Finally, their focus must be unwaveringly on developing pedagogies consistent with sustainable workload and long-term effectiveness. Only such criticality has the power to unite voices in mutually supportive networks, and to protect education from policy decisions and political agendas whose purpose or effect might be to undermine the purpose of education in a democracy.

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