

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL DISPOSITIONAL RESILIENCE AMONG TEACHER CANDIDATES: REFRAMING CHAOTIC EXPERIENCE AS RESOURCE FOR TEACHER LEARNING

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Abstract

While engagement with content knowledge and pedagogical expertise enjoys considerable attention in teacher education, the simultaneous development of professional teacher dispositions remains a necessary task of teacher preparation. In this brief non-traditional paper, experiences of teacher candidates participating in a teacher preparation program and high school partnership pilot structured-field experience in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas are explored relative to the emergent development of teacherly dispositions. Initially, professional teacher disposition – and more particularly resilience as an essential type of teacherly disposition – is defined. Later, chaotic experiences arising within the context of participation in a research-supported structured-field program are framed as valuable opportunities for teacher candidates in situ learning of resilience as a vital professional disposition for future teaching. Crucially, a natural world-based multimodal pedagogical intervention foregrounding tacit engagement with resilience is described. In conclusion, three rudimentary strategies for how experiences of chaos and complexity can be integrated as a vital component of teacher preparation contexts are offered. Ultimately, this piece describes the need to explicitly engage chaotic situations within teacher preparation contexts to foster resilience as a quintessential disposition among teacher candidates preparing to engage the unforgiving complexity of teaching.

Keywords: Resilience, teacher education, structured-field experiences, complexity, conceptual metaphor

Introduction

The development of professional teacher dispositions remains a primary, essential task of teacher education (Diez & Raths, 2007; InTASC, 2013; Knoepen & Davidson-Jenkins, 2007; Lee Smith & Skarbek, 2013; NCATE, 2013). Professional teacherly dispositions, or “tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs” (Villegas, 2007, p. 373), are indispensable towards, among others, sustainable pedagogical practice (Burden & Byrd, 2019, pp. 3-4) and attendance to issues of social justice in the classroom (Villegas, 2007). One of these professional dispositions, resilience (Johnson et al., 2015; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mansfield 2020), or the “capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity” (Tait, 2008, p. 58), is inextricably related to personal efficacy and emotional intelligence (p. 61). It is also exemplified through critical professional traits such as social competence, problem solving, the ability to rebound from difficulty, learning from experience, self-care, and optimism (pp. 69-70). While the literature has traditionally focused on the importance of fostering student resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Krovetz, 1999; Nottmeyer & Bush, 2013), it is significant to note that the same resilient practices that help inform student success are also relevant to teacher success. Consequently, learning resilience in pre-service teacher education contexts is ultimately essential towards novice teacher success, commitment, and retention (Tait, 2008) amidst the “unforgiving complexity of teaching” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 3). Furthermore, teacher capacity to enact resilience as a multifaceted professional disposition is also a valuable means of modeling resilience as an essential life skill for students.

In this brief paper, the experiences of three teacher candidates participating in a teacher preparation program and high school partnership pilot structured-field experience in Texas' Rio Grande Valley in Spring 2019 are anecdotally described relative to the development of teacherly dispositions. While the bilingual, bicultural borderland (Cline & Necochea, 2006) of the Rio Grande Valley presents a unique, vibrant context in which to think about teacher education and learning to teach, the importance of professional dispositions for teacher learners is of broader concern. In particular, chaotic experiences arising within the day-by-day context of participation in a research-supported structured-field experience are here framed as valuable opportunities for teacher candidates in situ learning of resilience as a vital professional disposition for future teaching. In other words, such chaos, when mobilized, is a valuable resource for learning resilience. While field experiences may be *structured*, unforeseen situations arising from the messiness of everyday life mean that there is always chaos interspersing the structure. To this end, I tender the metaphor of bamboo (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) – an exceptionally resilient plant – to illustrate the primary difference between the necessary planned, structured, and unplanned, chaotic elements of field-based teacher education experiences. In so doing, I wish to align my framing of the teacher education-focused structured-field experience with the philosophical reading of structure which pervades new materialist (Snaza et al., 2016) and complexity theories (Davis & Sumara, 2006), namely, that structure is simultaneously caused yet accidental, familiar yet unique, complete yet in-process.

Bamboo is a rhizome: a root system characterized by invisible subterranean complexity that gives rise to interconnected though seemingly separate sprouts above the surface. Teacher education in field-based contexts is akin to bamboo in at least two ways. First, the means through which we evaluate and measure teacher candidates' mastery of professional learning often – like bamboo sprouts above the surface – takes on the tidy evidence-based appearance of structure and organization. Teacher candidates demonstrate their pedagogical competence by completing highly structured key assessments. These include assessment and instructional planning, as well as data literacy assignments that require reliance on contextual data to identify concrete accommodations for learners with exceptionalities and English language learners. A second characteristic of the professional learning of teacher candidates that, like the intertwined root system of bamboo below the surface, is characteristically less visible and more complex, namely, the learning of professional teacher dispositions. Such learning is difficult to structure since it occurs most optimally in direct context to spontaneous everyday situations and demanding professional and interactional encounters and is illustrated by the following three post-experience student reflections.

Ronaldo, a young Latino teacher candidate, struggles to get from his field mentor teacher a substantial amount of information necessary to complete several teacher preparation course assignments directly related to the structured-field experience. He is moved from one mentor teacher to another on a weekly basis – a situation arising from scheduling conflicts within the high school. Ronaldo words this experience as follows:

One experience that stands out for me would be not knowing what teacher and classroom I would be in from week to week. Due to admin constantly pulling out my mentor teacher, I was usually with one of three teachers, varying depending on the time of day and if the teachers were absent or not. This helped me become more flexible as it was something I was worried about in the school setting as I am one who loves structure/order, but due to this I have grown to love being flexible in the school setting

Teresa, a young Latina teacher candidate, and her partner prepare a detailed lesson plan for their (co-)teaching demonstration only to be told by their mentor teacher that they now have a third less instructional time than was originally planned. Teresa reports:

While teaching our lesson we were told that we only had 30 minutes instead of 45 minutes. We had to rearrange the whole lesson to accommodate for the new time frame.

Consuela, a young Latina teacher candidate who is suddenly handed the responsibility to conduct a lesson for which she has not prepared after her mentor is called out of the class frames her experience as follows:

My mentor teacher just told me to teach the lesson. I was so nervous because I thought I was only going to observe and now she wants me to teach the class and I have no time to prepare. Then she leaves and I'm thinking, how am I going to teach the rest of this Social Studies lesson and what if the students dis me? I went into honey badger mode.

Consuela's reference to a "honey badger" – the second nature-based conceptual metaphor deployed in this paper – is significant as I usually initiate in-class teacher preparation course engagement with resilience prior to embarking on the structured-field experience by screening and debriefing several short video clips from both the National Geographic documentary film, *Snake Killers: Honey Badgers of the Kalahari* (Hughes et al., 2002) and the PBS nature documentary, *Honey Badgers: Masters of Mayhem* (Gooder, 2014). In these film clips, African honey badgers – or *Mellivora capensis* – are portrayed as overcoming significant complexities and challenges. I instruct teacher candidates to utilize the six characteristics of resilience provided by Tait (2008) and to jot down both what the challenge was confronting the honey badger as well as to identify the particular resilient skill deployed by the honey badger at such time: a) social competence, b) problem-solving, c) the ability to rebound from difficulty, d) learning from experience, e) self-care, and f) optimism (the last one requires some anthropomorphic projection on the part of teacher candidates). Later, teacher candidates apply the characteristics of resilience – social competence, problem-solving, the ability to rebound from difficulty, learning from experience, self-care, and optimism – to problems and challenges they have personally overcome before finally applying these strategies to real-world classroom and school scenarios that they either may be encountering or may encounter in future.

In context to resilience as a professional disposition, teacher education can learn a lot from the African honey badger. For one, the honey badger possesses particularly *thick skin* – a trait quintessential to teacher survival. Second, it can adapt its cognition and body to cope and thrive in most hostile environments. Third, the honey badger is revered for embodying dispositions like determination, tenacity, and boldness. In contrast, the honey badger's size is small and unassuming relative to its formidable surroundings. Its primary environment – the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa – is an extremely challenging environment marked by chaos and complexity. Likewise, teacher education in field-based contexts is highly complex and presents challenges that often at first appear threatening and chaotic, yet which require resilience to negotiate, manage, and overcome. In fact, numerous teacher candidate reflections of our pilot structured-field experience – much like the brief narratives above – have since highlighted examples of chaos flooding programmatic attempts at implementing structure. Among others, teacher candidates commonly report experiences of suddenly being reassigned by school administrators from their designated mentor teachers to teachers who are not fully prepared to provide effective mentorship; mentor teachers being too tightly constrained for time to communicate around interrelated course/field key assessments that teacher candidates are expected to complete in regular consultation with their mentors, as well as insufficient opportunity to directly interact with students or provide program-mandated exploratory direct instruction under the auspices of their mentor teachers.

Value of Chaos and Complexity for Learning to Teach

Since chaotic and complex encounters are chaotic in that these are characterized by disorder relative to the stated aims of the field experience and are often difficult to immediately address and change due to the involvement of multiple role-players in the structured-field experience, they require reconsideration of the value of situated learning for developing professional teacher dispositions. Additionally, such experiences also require the reflexive means necessary to make sense of and reinforce context-based learning amidst the chaos of everyday life. Furthermore, due to their psycho-affective nature, the learning of teacherly dispositions requires the personal adoption and application of key professional and relational values and beliefs that inevitably change aspects of the character of teacher candidates. This means that rather than sheltering teacher candidates from unpleasant emotions like anxiety, teacher educators need to encourage and even model engagement with such emotions as a valuable constituent towards the integration of resilience as a vital teacherly disposition.

Teaching will always be complex (Davis & Sumara, 2006) – a reality stemming from the chaos principle, namely that disorder and unpredictability pervade not only the Cosmos but all of life (Bey, 2003). Consequently, linear predictability and certain outcome in curricular and instructional contexts are tenuous at best (Doll, 1993). Rather, chaos and its ensuing complexities are productive of new modes of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1997), as well as pedagogical and curricular innovation (Bernard & Slattery, 1992; Doll, 2012). As pointed out by Doll (1993), “chaos is not a wild, random abandon. Far from it, the pattern is quite orderly but complex . . . random, but it is a pattern” (p. 93) – a process that Doll (2012) refers to elsewhere as “unpredictable determinism” (p. 17). In other words, chaos is not reckless abandon; it is a highly composite form of order that upon first glance, presents itself as disorder yet is only superficially disordered in that its deeper complex structures have yet to be deciphered and articulated. Such observation is of particular relevance to the contemporary context of teaching and learning. Recognition of the inevitable, omnipresent influence of chaos in processes of teaching and learning does not circumvent teacher responsibility. Instead, such enables a more complex, nuanced grappling with accountability that underscores the need for teacher preparation programs and experiences to foster professional teacherly dispositions characterized by heightened resilience, resourcefulness, and relationality in a manner that is, for instance, pliable in context to student needs.

Chaotic situations and contexts arising within pre-service educator preparation experiences – such as field-based experiences – can therefore be strategically utilized towards the development of greater dispositional resilience among teacher candidates. Resilience is, after all, a disposition characterized by the recognition and subsequent utilization of complexity as a professional resource. While I am still thinking through how to further develop my teacher educator engagement with and framing of chaos as a valuable resource towards the development of resilience as a teacherly disposition, I offer three rudimentary strategies for how experiences of chaos and complexity can be integrated as a vital component of teacher preparation contexts:

- Teacher candidates participating in field-based experiences should be encouraged to keep a reflective journal of challenging experiences encountered in the field, including reflecting on their accompanying emotions. Such practical reflective journaling can be incorporated into the teacher education class where teacher candidates think through, develop, and discuss proactive problem-solving actions.
- Teacher educators should avoid the temptation to coddle teacher candidates during field-based experiences characterized by uncomfortable emotions like anxiety and frustration. Instead, teacher educators would do well to offer encouragement and guidance, where appropriate, while explicitly framing the uncomfortable situation as a valuable opportunity for the teacher candidate to assume greater responsibility and experiment with a range of alternative attitudes and practices.
- On a philosophical level, teacher education curricula need to purposefully frame the messy, uncertain, unplanned aspects of teaching and learning, as well as human interaction in general, as an inevitable characteristic of life rather than as a failure or error of sorts. After all, success in any form is not a given; success is usually the product of multiple failures, perseverant reengagement, focus, and effort. Recently, while in conversation with a highly experienced and respected educator in the local community around the topic of resilience, this teacher described the process of resilience as running a course of *improvise, adapt, and overcome*.

Such strategies may go some way towards enabling teacher educators and teacher candidates to reflexively analyze and engage complex social and pedagogical interactions within structure field contexts. Here, in particular, teacher candidates as researchers of their localized contexts and practices are better enabled to learn dispositional resilience as a flexible and changeable attitude in the very encounter with social and pedagogical complexity since the work of trying to understand things should be accompanied by the recognition that “we are part of the things we are trying to understand” (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 16). Such approach stresses learning to teach as a highly personal experience in which uncertainty, and even error, is accorded profound pedagogical value and potency (Britzman, 2003).

Furthermore, bearing in mind that chaos is a highly composite form of order that upon first glance, presents itself as disorder, yet is only superficially disordered in that its deeper complex structures have yet to be deciphered and articulated, a recognizing, analyzing, and utilizing of apparent chaos needs to be a key component of how teacher educators stimulate the development of resilience as professional teacher disposition among teacher candidates. Chaos moves from disorder to order when its manifold parts are recognized as part of a dynamic structure that is complex. Yet, how can complexity – and by implication, complex phenomena – be made more palatable within teacher education contexts? A way to accomplish this is to provide teacher candidates with a basic analytical framework through which seemingly chaotic phenomena can be partly dissected. For instance, a basic triangular framework may comprise the following complexity-focused analytical foci as a means towards beginning to make better sense of apparent chaos:

- **Self-organization:** Identifying how actions of autonomous agents like teachers and students are interlinked and co-dependent in adaptive networks, and comprised of many small parts without centralized control (e.g. a flock of birds). Here, observable phenomena are framed as emergent and spontaneously being enacted from a bottom-up direction that transcends the total determinants of central organizers or governing structures.
- **Nonlinearity:** Identifying how social phenomena, including those in the sphere of education, are governed by negative (stabilization) and positive (amplification) feedback loops related to homeostasis (e.g. weather systems and the Butterfly Effect)
- **Adaptability:** Identifying how social systems like schools and classrooms embody their histories and are able to morph their own structures and adapt in order to maintain their viability within dynamic contexts (e.g. Darwinian evolution)

Conclusion

Complex social systems like schools and classrooms do not – and should not ever be expected to – operate in perfect balance or harmony since stable equilibrium implies death for the complex system. Such observation holds deep implication for how we view the normal, standard, correct, and orthodox not only with regard to education in general, but especially teacher education in particular. Ultimately, while not states to which we aspire, chaos and complexity as inevitable realities nonetheless hint at the social vibrancy of schools and classrooms and offer an opportunity for the emergence and practice of teacher agency amidst the unforgivable complexity of teaching.

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