

DEVELOPING TEACHERS' RESILIENCE IN TODAY'S CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Developing resilience in today's culture requires a different approach, as the current generation of students face more unique challenges. The pandemic emphasized an existing problem, and also acknowledged the fact that Texas is losing teachers. The authors present a case for developing resilience in students through the teachers in the field. Education, as a profession, is losing teachers at alarming rates and due to various reasons. This highlights the fact that teachers themselves might lack strength and resilience, and therefore are ill-equipped to pass this trait along to students. Educator preparation programs can make changes and incorporate different trainings within the curriculum prior to initial teacher certification, with the goal of building the skills needed for resilience in today's classrooms. Recruitment back into the field of teaching, changes to educator preparation programs' curriculum, teacher well-being, and conflict resolution skills are discussed within the article.

Keywords: *Teacher attrition, teacher well-being, educator preparation, resilience, reform*

Introduction

Current studies show that more teachers are now considering leaving the profession than ever before. The National Education Association (as cited in Walker, 2022) found that 55% of teachers are expected to leave the field before originally planned. This is up 18% from previous years. In addition to this alarming number, the survey also indicated that about 90% of teachers feel that pandemic-related stress and burnout are significant issues in today's schools. Teachers know that a major shift in policy is what it is going to take to make a difference in stress and burnout levels. Will (2021) noted that even though teachers are pondering leaving the field at higher rates than before COVID-19, there are areas in which school administrators could possibly help to improve in order to retain teachers. The main areas of concern for current teachers included heavier workloads due to a shortage of staffing positions, achieving state mandates (particularly test scores), a significant rise in school shootings, and social issues such as racism and vaccine mandates. Although administrators might not be able to solve each issue, there are ways to alleviate some of the pressures including hiring more support staff and offering quality professional development on transitional learning/teaching, mental health problems, and social issues.

While most of the newer studies focus on the aftermath of COVID-19 in education, there were already problems brewing in the teacher market prior to 2020. Hiring and retaining quality teachers is not a new issue. Garcia and Weiss (2019) offered statistics to show there was a significant decline in teachers completing an educator preparation program from 2008-2016. There were declines as drastic as 45%

enrollment in traditional educator preparation programs, showing that before the pandemic ever hit, the nation was facing a sharp decline in people choosing to teach. This line has, however, plateaued in more recent years. According to The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2022), the majority of educator preparation programs (EPP) expressed minimal loss of enrollees post-COVID, despite the fact that most programs are continuing to face budget cuts and loss of staff. This is promising for the future of education and the certification of new teachers. However, this shows a disconnect between candidates entering programs with those in the field wanting to leave the profession. This proves that now the attention needs to be aimed at retaining quality teachers, possibly beginning with developing career durability and resiliency prior to initial certification. Could changes be implemented in an educator preparation program to help to increase strength and resilience in teachers when they enter the field?

Preparedness in a quality educator preparation program is essential for the success of new teachers. But that can even be delved into further, as studies have long supported that traditional programs tend to show better preparation, which translates into teachers who stay in the field for a longer period of time. A recent report by Horn, C. et al. (2021) found that teachers who were trained in for-profit alternative programs generally had lower retention rates than those who were certified through a university-based program. Given this evidence, along with the findings showing existing teachers are considering a career change, points to a need for reform within educator preparation programs. Reform should focus on recruitment efforts into university-based programs and early development of both content and pedagogical expertise, along with an advanced focus on career readiness specific for the candidate's teaching field to develop long-term resiliency. The AACTE (as cited in Texas Educator Preparation, 2022) has long reported that teachers who are better prepared are more likely to stay in the field, whereas a lack of preparation can contribute to burnout and higher levels of discouragement.

Recruiting for university-based programs may look very different now than it did a few years ago. Although recruiting for teachers is specific and requires specialized information delivery, there are some basic recruitment strategies that can be utilized, especially in regard to online recruitment efforts. For example, Energage (2021) suggests that employers use company branding, prioritize diversity and equity practices, treat candidates as customers, utilize social media, create succinct recruitment videos, and contact potential candidates. This applies to a general workplace, but could easily transfer directly to educator preparation programs and recruitment efforts directed at potential students. First of all, potential candidates need to know that research exists and generally supports future success as a teacher by route of traditional certification programs (Horn, C. et al, 2021), and further studies support that although recruitment may be more effective in high school-age students than adults (Bragg, 2007), there are many non-traditional students interested in pursuing education as their career, too.

There are plenty of stories in the news every week to discourage people from pursuing a career in education. This mindset will need to be taken into account when programs are developing their branding and recruitment plans. The intention should be to purposefully share knowledge, research, and facts, while also appealing to prospective candidates' individual interests and goals. University-based preparation programs can use this knowledge to brand themselves to attract students interested in teaching in Texas. Programs need to distinguish themselves and create a name that students associate with the program. Articulating and advertising what truly sets programs apart can help develop a reputation that is not only positive, but sustainable. More traditional recruiting efforts such as high school visits, community events, and contacting students through phone and technology can be conducted by faculty or staff members within the programs to develop relationships and share information regarding the career of education. Additionally, there are programs now in place to specifically recruit people into teaching. In Texas, a

grant program developed through the Texas Education Agency (TEA), called Grow Your Own (GYO) has the slogan, “Your future teachers are in your high school seats” and aims to recruit and certify future teachers through high school dual credit courses, transitioning aides and substitutes, and traditional-based programs. GYO currently is conducting research to track their success and effectiveness, but the goal is to bring a more diverse pool of candidates into teaching, with a strong focus on rural and small school districts in the state. Knowledge is power. Bringing new educators into the field who are both dedicated and resilient, begins with a strong preparation program with knowledgeable staff who can develop not only college relationships, but career-long relationships as a support.

Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2017) laid out a strategic plan that addressed teacher recruitment and retention. Among the main actions to meet these goals were enhanced and more rigorous teacher preparation and extended training opportunities to teachers already in the field. The plan, with the years 2017-2021 specifically addressed, noted that teachers are the best resource to help students be successful, and therefore needed thorough training. The plan’s actions to accomplish this goal included more rigorous and increased testing requirements for initial certification, quality clinical residency experiences, enhanced teacher appraisal methods, and a guarantee to uphold career integrity by holding teachers accountable for misconduct. The particular goal of increasing rigor and testing requirements for certification has resulted in programs needing to focus on exam scores and embed testing components throughout courses, much like public school teachers are forced to do to meet standards on the Texas state assessment. Unfortunately, this diminishes the overall goal of preparation programs and takes away from the curricular excellence needed to develop teachers who are ready to take on the profession, and be prepared to face a classroom full of eager youth. Although these goals support the idea that better preparation leads to more success in the classroom and increased student performance, the studies show clearly that Texas is still falling short in recruiting and retaining teachers (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Walker, 2022). Recently, Texas’ Governor Greg Abbott issued a letter to the Texas Education Agency to designate a task force to investigate and possibly make changes, including adjustments to the teacher certification process (Office of the Texas Governor, 2022). Perhaps this will result in needed changes, especially in regards to initial certification, which will allow preparation programs to begin drawing candidates back in, offering exceptional curriculums, and placing well-prepared, enthusiastic teachers back in Texas public schools.

Keeping in mind the reality of teacher attrition, along with the necessity of effective recruitment, the focus could shift to the actual preparation programs once candidates are admitted. The real catalyst for change in future teachers’ resilience can begin in the programs, before initial certification ever occurs. Administrative input can help set this stage through careful consideration of course requirements and alignment within a degree plan, curricular alignment within the program, curricular changes and enhancements, and earlier field placements to better prepare future teachers to enter the profession. Enhancements to the curriculum within course offerings can be accomplished in alignment with the program learning outcomes, course-specific learning outcomes, and state standards that must be adhered to, but instructors should have the prerogative to supplement the minimum requirements as they see best meets candidates’ individual needs. Some incorporations that would be beneficial include specific training in the areas of developing a healthy work/life balance, effective conflict resolution skills, and mental health of both teachers and students.

A simple search on the work/life balance of teachers provides underwhelming results in both quantity and quality, and the studies that do exist are largely out of country. However, a study conducted by Education Support (2022) presented alarming data showing that over 70% of teachers have trouble

separating their work from their home lives. This imbalance can cause issues with teachers' health, well-being, and personal lives. The study presented several ideas for teachers to reestablish this balance such as learning to prioritize commitments, learning to say no, taking weekends and holidays off, and building a bank of resources through the years to cut down on time needed for planning and paperwork. EPP's could implement instruction early into the curriculum to help teachers develop skills needed to maintain a positive balance between school and home.

Effectively managing large groups of students and handling issues within the classroom are an inherent part of teaching. Professionals have noted that student discipline issues and declining parental support contribute to teachers exiting the profession (Common Good, 2004). There are many aspects to handling conflicts in all workplaces, but schools hold even more facets, as teachers have to be able to work with students, parents, colleagues, and administration. This places a greater strain on teachers than simply knowing their subject area content. A recent study by Valente and Lorencio (2019) presented the idea that developing teachers' emotional intelligence (EI) could help teachers better navigate students' behavioral issues in the classroom. They noted a strong correlation between higher EI's in teachers and their ability and willingness to communicate with students regarding their behaviors, thus having a more positive effect. Interestingly, the opposite occurred in teachers with lower EI's conflict resolution skills, and those teachers were more likely to make aggressive statements, be inflexible, and escalate tensions. Given the increase in student and parent conflicts in schools, this study supported the notion that pre-service teachers should have extensive training in developing and enhancing their emotional intelligence, relationship building, and conflict resolution prior to entering the profession. Although these skills will not eliminate the issues that arise in the classrooms, they can help to better prepare teachers to effectively handle situations with all parties involved. If teachers are better prepared to handle issues, perhaps this will help to alleviate some of the burnout that occurs due to conflicts.

In addition to EI, teachers can develop resiliency by addressing mental wellness. It is common for educator preparation programs' curriculum to target academic content and instructional pedagogy and fail to address mental wellness and overall well-being of future teachers. When these social aspects of a teacher's education are overlooked teachers can be easily overwhelmed by the cognitive, emotional, and social demands placed on them every day. Jennings (2015) explains how the practice of mindfulness trains one's mind to be cognizant of internal and external emotions and experiences in order to manage our emotions. Classroom teachers, empowered by managing their emotions, have the wherewithal to minimize conflict, strengthen prosocial behaviors, and increase resiliency. As teachers demonstrate mindfulness - staying in the present moment while practicing non-judgmental awareness, students learn how to do the same. Cultivating students' ability to exercise mindfulness fosters a classroom environment of calmness, while still experiencing a climate of active learning. Students' self-efficacy and confidence flourish when they feel emotionally safe, supported and encouraged by their teacher; resulting in increased resilience. Students become the benefactors of resiliency as teachers exhibit and promote resilient behaviors. Learning to be resilient may transform the trajectory of teachers' and students' lives.

As Texas begins to acknowledge teacher attrition being a significant issue (Office of the Texas Governor- Greg Abbott), perhaps the focus can shift away from a test-focused culture that has placed an overemphasis on what teachers can demonstrate solely academically for initial certification. Many skills can be incorporated into the curriculum within EPP's to better prepare teachers for the profession. This preparedness will help to develop resilience within teachers, which will hopefully translate into retaining good teachers. When students have the skills to recover from setbacks, adjust to life's hardships, and adapt to trauma and tragedy they become resilient. Clearly, being resilient is far more than simply coping

or pushing through tough times. Resiliency in school-age children increases the likelihood they will attempt new experiences in the classroom.

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