

Resilient Teachers: Resisting Stress and Burnout

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Abstract

Across Australia, the incidence of teacher stress and burn-out causes serious concern. Many studies of teacher stress have focused on the dysfunctional strategies of individual teachers - in other words they have adopted a deficit approach to the problem with the focus firmly fixed on 'what's going wrong'. From this perspective, failure of some teachers to cope has generally been defined as a personal rather than an institutional weakness and the solutions that have been promoted have been largely palliative or therapeutic.

The study being reported in this paper adopted a different approach to the question of teacher stress and burn-out. Instead of asking 'what's going wrong' we asked why are some teachers able to cope successfully with the same kinds of stressors that appear to defeat others - in other words, we looked at 'what's going right'.

We interviewed 10 primary school teachers in hard-to-staff schools in disadvantaged areas. Using a screening device we had developed, principals identified teachers who were 'at risk of stress and burnout' but were 'persistently and successfully coping with stress' (i.e. 'resilient'). Our findings indicate that these teachers' sources of coping with stress are many, varied and largely (but not exclusively) located outside the individual.

Introduction

Across Australia, the incidence of teacher stress and burn-out is a cause for serious concern. While individual Education Departments are reluctant to release details about this issue, some studies carried out over the last 20 years provide insights into the extent of the problem:

- Studies in the 1980s in Victoria found that around 160 teachers each year were superannuated on the grounds of ill-health. Their average age was 44-45 years and one half to two thirds were retired early because of psychological ill-health; a further one-tenth retired because of stress-related cardiovascular disorder (Otto 1986).
- A big large study into teacher stress in all education sectors in WA (Louden 1987) found that 10 - 20% of the 2138 respondents were experiencing psychological distress, a further 9% were suffering severe psychological distress - in both categories, the proportions found were much greater than for the general population.
- An extensive survey into of teacher workloads and stress done undertaken by the Independent Education Union in Victoria and NSW (IEU 1996) found that teachers reported experiences of stress in a range of areas including due to workload

pressure, difficulties with management, and poor staff-student relationships. This stress manifested itself in terms of irritability at home (59%) and in class (55%), anxiety (64%) and feelings of powerlessness (45%). Psychosomatic complaints (e.g. chronic fatigue, headaches, shingles, heart palpitations) were reported by 18% of respondents.

Review of the Literature

Most of the studies into teacher stress agree about its causes. Numerous studies of teacher stress have established its causes sources (see Louden 1987, Dinham 1993, Punch and Tuettteman 1996, Pithers and Soden 1999, Kyriacou 2001). They include teachers' perceptions of: These include:

- *Poor student-teacher relationships* which can arise when
 - students lack motivation and respect for teachers
 - there are classroom behaviour problems
 - there is miscommunication or lack of understanding between the teacher and students of different class/ethnic/cultural backgrounds
- *Time pressure* which can arise when
 - there is inadequate time for preparation
 - unrealistic demands are made by administrators/managers
 - unrealistic deadlines are imposed
 - there are issues concerning workload
- *Role conflict* which can arise when
 - there are conflicts among teaching philosophies within the school
 - education department policies demand innovation and change
 - new roles are required to be undertaken without appropriate training
 - administrative demands and paperwork are excessive
- *Poor working conditions* which can arise when
 - there are inadequate facilities and resources
 - class sizes are too big
 - there are excessive noise levels in the working environment
 - the school is geographically isolated
- *Lack of control and decision-making power* which can arise when
 - the bureaucratic structure of school is very hierarchical and power is concentrated in the hands of a few
 - there is autocratic leadership
- *Poor colleague relationships* which can arise when
 - there is lack of trust and/or cooperation between colleagues
 - there is a competitiveness in the school culture
- *Feelings of personal inadequacy* which can arise when
 - teachers feel incompetent and/or poorly trained
 - teachers are required to teach outside their areas of competence and training
 - there is inadequate praise and/or recognition for achievement from peers and school leaders
- *Extra-organizational stressors* which can arise when
 - there are poor negative community attitudes towards teachers and schools
 - teachers' personal lives and relationships are unstable/insecure

The consequences of teacher stress are also commonly understood (see Sinclair and Ryan 1987, Dinham 1992). From an organizational point of view there is the significant loss of skilled and experienced teachers through resignation and/or premature retirement from all

levels of the teaching workforce. Those stressed teachers who stay within the profession, on the other hand, are likely to be increasingly less effective in key areas such as lesson organization, student behaviour management, responsiveness to students and self confidence relationships with parents (Sinclair and Ryan 1987).

In individual human terms, the costs of teacher stress can be huge and include, impaired health, reduced self confidence and self esteem and damaged personal relationships. If early retirement or resignation is taken, often the consequence is dramatically reduced economic status. On the other hand, in a study of teachers who had resigned from the NSW teaching force, Dinham (1992) found that it was common among those participants who had experienced teaching-related stress to report that these symptoms abated once they had resigned, despite the fact that often their new occupations were also very demanding.

According to Kyriacou (2001), the ways in which individual teachers attempt to cope with stress fall into two main categories: *palliative* and *direct action*. Palliative techniques do not deal with the source of the stress but are rather aimed at reducing the impact of the stressor. Many studies that look at how teachers cope with stress (e.g. Sinclair 1992) show how some palliative techniques involve behaviours that are, in the long run, dysfunctional. Such activities as excessive drinking, smoking, and avoidance behaviour, for example, are primarily designed to ease feelings of distress even though these behaviours are not necessarily in the interests of the those with whom the individual teacher is interacting. When palliative techniques fail, teachers often take frequent leave and/or seek medical advice which tends to lead to a regime of medication (Dinham 1992). For those who do cope with stress through palliative techniques, their success is often constructed as an individual disposition or strength bolstered by such 'mental health' strategies as regular exercise, hobbies and relaxation techniques.

Direct action techniques for coping with the stresses of teaching involve attempts to eliminate the sources of stress. Some studies of the way teachers cope with stress (e.g. Borg and Falzon 1990, Cockburn 1996, Benmansour 1998, Kyriacou 2001) indicate that the direct action coping strategies most frequently adopted by teachers include:

- taking action to deal with problems
- keeping feelings under control
- seeking support from colleagues and/or the principal
- having significant adult relationships
- organizing time and prioritising work tasks
- being competent (i.e. thorough lesson preparation; understanding work to be taught).

While these studies of teachers' coping strategies have revealed some valuable insights, a more fertile avenue of investigation may involve the application of the concept of resilience. Rutter (1990: 181) describes resilience as 'the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity'. Most studies of resilience have focused on 'at risk' groups of children and adolescents and how they respond to adverse life events. Yet a few isolated studies have appropriated the key ideas and language of childhood resilience and used them to shed light on the adaptive behaviours of various professional groups which experience work related stress (see Bobek, 2002; Gordon and Coscarelli, 1996; Antonucci, 1991).

The Concepts of Resilience and Protective Factors

The concept of resilience emerged, almost by accident, from longitudinal studies of 'at risk' groups of children as they encountered many life stressors during their development, through childhood and adolescence, to adulthood (Werner and Smith 1987; Silva and

Stanton 1996). While these were essentially epidemiological studies of the incidence of disease and pathology in the studied populations, interest grew in what Rutter (1990: 181) describes as 'the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual difference in people's responses to stress and adversity'. As Benard (1991: 4) observes:

a consistent - and amazing - finding has emerged. Although a certain percentage of these high-risk children developed various problems (a percentage higher than the normal population) a greater percentage of the children became healthy, competent young adults.

Later studies focused on specific populations of these children and adolescents (Garmezy 1974; Anthony 1987; Werner and Smith 1988; Garmezy and Rutter 1983). In these studies the subjects were classified as being at risk, yet rather than focusing on those subjects who became casualties of these risk factors, the studies focused instead on those who had not succumbed. The questions this work investigated were:

- What is it about these children and adolescents that enables them to survive?
- What makes them apparently immune to the factors that negatively affect others?

Instead of focusing on individual deficit, the new approach focused on individual and community strengths and thus, the concept of resilience emerged in the psychological literature

Those characteristics that distinguish 'resilient' from 'non-resilient' young people are referred to as *protective factors* or *protective processes* and these can be both *internal* or *external*. *Internal protective factors* include individual skills and orientations such as social competence, problem-solving ability, mastery, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future (see Waters and Sroufe 1983; Garmezy 1985; Rutter 1980; Masten, Best and Garmezy 1990). In relation to children and young people, *external protective factors* could be found in three main settings: home, school and community. Access to such things as supportive family members (Werner and Smith 1987), safe communities with opportunities for involvement (Pence 1988), schools with good academic records and caring teachers (Rutter et al. 1979) distinguished 'resilient' from 'non-resilient' young people.

These clusters of protective factors were confirmed and extended by our own qualitative research into child and adolescent resilience in South Australia (see Howard and Johnson 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Dryden, Johnson and Howard 1998).

In all our work with children and adolescents, we have identified several key protective factors, some which would be classified as *internal* and others *external*. Among the *internal* protective factors the chief ones have been:

2. a sense of agency or self efficacy (i.e. a belief that you have the ability to determine what happens to you to a large extent)
3. competence or achievement in some area of endeavour

Among the *external* factors we found the following to be crucially important in resilient children's lives:

6. having someone who takes an interest in you and who cares about what happens to you (e.g. family member, school teacher, club leader, coach)

7. having opportunities to belong to groups or organizations outside the home.

The Present Study

Resilience is clearly not a phenomenon that is uniquely found in young people - the daily press will yield cites many examples of footballers, businesses, errant politicians and even Qantas being referred to as being 'resilient'. However, for us to be able to apply this concept to teachers, two essential conditions had to be met: the teachers had to be 'at risk' of stress and burn-out by the nature of their work and they had to have persistently resisted these outcomes over an extended period of time. We show how these conditions were met in this study below.

The purpose of this study was to see whether those teachers who seem to be resilient were drawing on the same kinds of protective factors that have been identified in the literature on child and adolescent resilience. In our own work with young people, we have found that many protective factors are very simple, ordinary and even common-place and are often well within the capacities of individuals and organizations to provide. If the protective factors that support resilient teachers are equally simple and ordinary, then teacher education faculties, education bureaucracies, school leadership teams and others with responsibilities for the training care and management of practising teachers can help them avoid the debilitating and painful experiences associated with stress and burn-out.

Drawing on concepts and techniques arising from our work with 'resilient' and 'non-resilient' children (Howard and Johnson 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Dryden, Johnson and Howard 1998), the present study is different from much previous work concerning teacher stress in two important ways:

- First, unlike many of the studies concerning teacher stress and burn-out our study does not adopt a deficit approach. In other words, our focus is on 'what's going right' for teachers successfully coping with stress rather than on 'what's going wrong' for those who are not coping well.
- Second, many previous studies into teacher stress have used self-report questionnaire/surveys of general teaching populations (Kyriacou 2001). In our study we have conducted intensive interviews with individual teachers who are distinguished by their persistent ability to handle successfully teaching situations that are officially recognised as being very stressful.

Methods

This is a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to investigate 'resilient' teachers' strategies for coping with stress in day-to-day teaching in what are known as 'hard-to-staff' schools.

Selection of Participants

In our previous work we have developed good relations with a number of primary and secondary schools in the northern region of Adelaide. Many of these schools are located in highly disadvantaged areas where issues of unemployment, poverty, family breakdown and interpersonal violence are common. It is unsurprising then, that the schools in these areas face significant challenges from students and their families on a daily basis and that the teaching environment presents teachers with many potentially stressful experiences. For these reasons, the S.A. South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services Education Department formally classifies many of these schools as 'hard-to-staff'.

We approached the principals in 3 target schools and asked them to identify teachers who were 'at risk' of stress and burn-out, due to the nature of their work, but who were 'resilient' (i.e. they persistently and successfully cope with stress). Ten teachers were identified in this way and they were invited to participate in the study. Of these 10 teachers, 9 were women female and 1 was male. a man. While While this gender breakdown is less than desirable in research terms, these numbers reflect the heavy gender imbalance in the schools approached. For example, in one school only one of the 25 teachers was male.

Interview Schedule

The participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview schedule. The interviews were audio-taped. The questions we used were as follows:

1. Can you give me a brief summary or overview of your teaching career?
 - Where have you been?
 - How long were there?
 - What year levels have you taught?
 - How long have you been at this school?
 2. This school is classified as a 'hard to staff' school. From your perspective, why do you think that is so?
 3. What are some of the day-to-day stresses that you face teaching in this school?
 4. Can you tell me about a few of the most stressful incidents you have experienced teaching here?
 - What happened?
 - What did you do?
 - How did you feel?
 - How did you deal with your feelings?
- "Tell me some stories ..."
5. What are your main sources of support? Who do you talk to?
 - At school
 - Outside of school
 6. Do you have any regrets about some of the things that have happened here?
 7. What are you proud of the way you have handled difficult things here?
 8. What advice would you give a 'school choice' applicant (early career teacher, and experienced teacher) about teaching and doing well at this school?
 9. Do you think about your own resilience as a teacher teaching in a difficult teaching environment?
 10. What do you think are the most important influences on your resilience?

The tapes were transcribed for analysis using NUD•IST (QSR 1995), the data management software tool.

Analysis

In our analysis of the interview data, we looked for themes across the transcripts, for similarities and differences and for absences and silences. We also looked for the adult equivalents of the protective factors that we found in our work with young people.

Stressors

If there was any doubt in our minds about the difficult conditions under which teachers in hard-to-staff schools labour, our respondents dispelled them with calm descriptions of violence and disorder both within the classroom and outside. They all described incidents where children physically attacked other children or teachers by throwing furniture, punching, kicking and biting. Here is an example from Maria provides an example of a physical assault:

Maria: I'd probably have to say my most stressful experience was on my 5th day here when I gave a student a Consequence - which was only Time Out. Obviously in 5 days you don't know the children perfectly and that child couldn't accept it. He was an ADD and autistic child and he grabbed me and pulled me basically to the ground and the force was so incredibly strong it was a matter of okay how do I deal with this?

Participants also described verbal abuse from children and chronic refusal to comply with reasonable requests. Karen describes this particular kind of stress along with some others too:

Karen: One of the constant things that you often get from kids here is refusal. If you've actually asked them to do something you get a lot of 'I'm not going to do that' and all of that sort of thing so that's a constant one

Int: What do you do?

Karen: Well we always go through the 'Steps' so they're given a Reminder and then after a Reminder they have Thinking Time in the classroom, after Thinking Time then they go to Buddy Class. Then they get to come back and if they still can't follow instructions and get their work achieved and all of that sort of stuff then they have Yellow Card. It depends on the severity of what it is. I mean, if they've punched someone in the class then it needs to go straight to Yellow Card. So probably the big thing is refusal in the classroom. Another thing is probably... well it's not a huge stress because we've got a food program here but it's another thing you have to deal with if you're on your way to duty. Quite often kids are not bringing food for recess and lunch so you need to make sure they've got some. We've got a breakfast program where they actually get toast and make toast for recess or toast for lunch but, do you know what I mean, it's another thing that you have to make sure that it's done before you go out to duty and things like that. I think the main thing would be refusal. And then when you're on duty you quite often need to be destressing kids because they're all het up and almost ready to fight and

so you're often de-escalating anger out in the schoolyard and often getting a refusal and verbal abuse backlash from kids about 'I'm not doing that' and all the language that goes with that as well.

As Karen indicates above, other forms of stress involve knowing that some children come to school hungry, poorly dressed and often suffering from all various kinds of abuse and neglect. Here is another example from As Leanne comments, dealing with the consequences of abuse and neglect can be stressful:

Leanne: The worst things that I really find stressful are like, for example, I had a little girl come to me, her mouth was bleeding and she was screaming and mum was dragging her into class and you could see that she was still in the same clothes that she had on yesterday and no shoes on and things like that and her lip was bleeding. She was just hysterical and mum's just dumped her and run and those are the hard ones and getting to the bottom of the story and realising that at 3 o'clock this woman is going to come and pick her up.

Int: What had happened?

Leanne: She obviously was not cooperating on the way to school and mum had hit her and had been dragging her along and trying to get her to come to school. She didn't want to come to school because she didn't know whether mum was going to be home when she got home or whether mum was going to pick her up. It wasn't uncommon for her to still be here an hour or 2 hours after school had finished with no one to come and pick her up and we'd have to ring grandparents to come and get her.

Although the behaviour and circumstances of children in their classes are sources of stress for all our respondents, it was remarkable that all of them highlight dealing with aggressive, abusive parents as the major stressor. Kim, a principal, described how one child's father undertook an eighteen month-long campaign of intimidation involving regular invasions of the school office, principal's office and/or staff room to hurl abuse and threats. Cathy describes another incident:

Cathy: I got abused by a parent last week. She's a parent well known for this - she didn't favour me in abusing me, she's done it to quite a few of the staff. I was on the oval on duty and a child who happened to be in my class came up and said this particular child had punched him in the stomach. So I walked over to this child and said 'What happened?' and he just sort of looked over and his mum had jumped the fence and was storming over. So she was standing over there and I just said 'What happened?' and said it a couple of times and he just ignored me and she came belting over. She grabbed the kid that was in my class and stuck her finger right in his face and swore at him and said 'You touch my child and f'n this...' at him and he's only 6! I just stepped in and said 'Excuse me..' and was going to say 'Excuse me you can't do that' and then she just turned on me and right in my face and yelling and

screaming at me and she grabbed the kid and got in the car and did a big burnout and left. So that was probably the worst recent incident. She's always involved in a bit of fighting around the school. At first I was a little bit shaken because she was right in and she is well known for being quite aggressive.

Recognising that angry parents pose a significant threat to both teachers and students, the S.A. Government just recently moved to implement legislation empowering school staff and police to remove people 'acting in an offensive and disorderly manner' from school grounds and bar them for up to 3 months.

Resilience: Agency

As with our resilient child and adolescent research subjects, a consistent feature of our participants' talk here in this study was a pervasive sense of agency - a strong belief in their ability to control what happens to them (the opposite of which is fatalism or helplessness). In our teachers, this showed up as revealed most strongly in the way they chose to respond to the aggression and violence, from either students or parents, which they experienced on an almost daily basis. The key strategy mentioned by all 10 teachers in the three different schools was to depersonalise the unpleasant or difficult events. They did this in a number of ways:

- first, they assessed what had happened and if they felt they had acted appropriately, they chose not to see the event as their fault or to feel guilty about it. Here is Maria talking about the event with the autistic student described above:

Int: How did you feel about what happened? Did you blame yourself?

Maria: Not at all. No, because you can't take things like that to heart. I did the best I could in the situation. Given that I had come into a new school and had known the children for only four days I think I managed the class very well.

Melissa describes the aftermath of being deliberately hit in the face by a five year old child during yard duty:

Melissa: The rest of the staff were quite supportive in terms of saying 'It's not your fault' and, 'We've all been there' sort of thing and 'It happens sometimes' [...]. In the end, I think I just said to myself it was the student and that it could have happened to anyone in that situation. That I hadn't brought it about in any way and that it could have been Sally or Sharon or Ryan or anyone - we all would have copped it.

- second, they all acknowledged that there had been occasions when they could have handled things better, but rather than agonise about it they chose to learn from the event and move on. Rob and Teresa provide examples of this:

Rob: I think it's important to remember that you're only human and everyone makes mistakes and that really the staff here are very supportive and that if you don't think you've handled something very well or something hasn't gone right, that it's not the end of the world.

Teresa: You do have to do a lot of reflecting ... what will I do next time, how did so-and-so handle this issue, how would so-and-so have handled it this rather than the way I did. Sometimes you have to stop and think 'OK, well maybe I didn't do this so well today but it went right last week' so you can sort of balance it out a bit. This way you don't only think about the bad things - because there are heaps of things that you do wrong. What good is it going to do if you're going to sit there and think 'Oh look I'm the worst counsellor in the world.' If you say that to yourself you may as well not come to work the next day

- third, part of our participants' externalising strategy was to explain the unpleasant events to themselves in ways that sought to understand the offending parent's or student's motivation and circumstances. Maria and Leanne both illustrate this approach:

Maria: I was in the middle of teaching a literacy lesson when this parent came charging in and began verbally abusing me in front of the whole class. That makes you feel very low. That happened at the start of the year. After talking to Celia [the principal] she simply explained or reiterated the fact that this particular parent didn't know how to deal with things rationally. He's used to dealing with things in a fiery manner so it wasn't directly an attack on me and I can't take it to heart and I've learnt since then. I had another one come in and it was nothing to do with me but to do with a school issue. I just dealt with it and then forgot about it afterwards, which is good.

Leanne: Being patient, understanding where they're coming from, their situations, their home life [is important] because normally you'll find a reason [for things going wrong] in there somewhere. Something that's going on. And don't take it personally when they lash out at you or something because you're just a sounding board for them and you need to shrug that off. I think that's a big thing.

- fourth, as we see with Maria above, the teachers have generally been taught strategies to depersonalise stressful events by others (usually more experienced or senior staff). Cathy was taught this approach during her first appointment at a Special School:

Cathy: One thing I was taught when I was in Special School is you don't take it personally and you kind of remove yourself from it and you step back and say 'OK, that's your choice but it has nothing to do with me'. If I've listened and I've done all the steps that I think are right then they're just making a choice. I was always taught not to take things personally.

Another agency-enhancing strategy that 7 of the 10 participants employed concerns what we've termed *moral purpose*. All of them had chosen to come to teach in hard-to-staff schools. To be sure, for some there had been some career advantage in doing this (i.e. moving from contract to permanent status) but they were all at pains to point out that the challenging nature of their school is what had persuaded them to apply for a position. The

chance of 'being able to make a difference' in children's lives and the confidence they could do this was a strong feature of the teachers' talk. Far from being naïve, zealous crusaders, our participants seemed to have a pretty realistic understanding of what and how much they could do.

Maria: [The school] is very challenging in terms of learning needs. I see it in literacy and numeracy. It's a vicious cycle that's recurring through three generations. So, it's a matter of if we obviously want to be here and have the urge to be here, we can do the best we can to try and break the cycle by teaching literacy and numeracy skills.

She also says elsewhere:

Maria: [The eastern suburbs schools] where I did my practice teaching were too pretty, too nice. You have to see the real world. You have to think about where you're going to start your career so, in 4th year I wanted to come out this way and see what it was like.

Int: Was it a shock?

Maria: To an extent yeah. I don't know what it is. I guess you have to have a genuine interest and actually see that what you're doing is achieving something. You're not just here for a job for money, you're actually working to change - not to change - to build upon those children's values and skills and knowledge [...]. I wouldn't see myself as the strongest person. You need to have a good heart to want to make a difference, not just to see it as a job.

Teresa echoes this view:

Teresa: I chose to come to this school and I'm really proud that I have the strength to keep doing it. I don't give up on the kids that a lot of people are saying 'Oh, he's just a no-hoper - don't bother.'. So I think it really comes down to loving your job and wanting to make a difference.

Melissa made the decision to work in her particular school after her final teaching practice which took place in another hard-to-staff-school in the area.

Melissa: After I finished my placement at Davey Downs, I said that I wanted to come back and work out here after I'd finished. I thought I could develop skills here that I wouldn't get the opportunity to develop elsewhere and I also felt that I, you know, that I could maybe give back something to the kids as well, that I could be a strong, committed teacher at a school which needed some strong committed teachers. So, it was very much a conscious decision.

Both the strategy of depersonalising stressful events and the strong moral purpose expressed in their choice of where to teach indicate to us that these teachers have a strong sense of their own agency. They have a clear belief in their ability to affect their own and

others' life circumstances and this translates into practice. Importantly, all but two of the teachers in this project indicated that they had learnt the depersonalising strategy either through personal reflection or from more experienced staff with whom they had debriefed after a stressful event.

Resilience: A strong support group

From our work with children and adolescents we have learnt that resilient individuals have strong connections with others and know that there are people who care about what happens to them. All of our teachers had diverse, caring networks of family and friends outside school (interestingly, only one admitted to having mostly teachers in her social network). All our respondents had caring partners with whom they could talk about their work although most claimed they tried to keep 'dumping their work troubles' on their partners to a minimum. What was particularly interesting in this group of teachers was their unanimous claim of strong support from colleagues and school leadership.

In all three schools the support of principals, deputy principals and school counsellors was evident on a daily basis. Two of the schools had instituted a system of progressive warnings and punishments for non-complying students (the 'Steps' system described by Karen on P. 7 above) in which the final step was the Yellow Card. This was a card the teacher could send to the front office indicating an emergency situation in which the teacher needed immediate assistance. All eight teachers from those two schools were high in their praise for this system and the fact that when a Yellow Card was issued they did get immediate assistance from a member of the leadership team.

Cathy: The whole senior staff here are very supportive. They all work really well together and they've got this Yellow Card system so as soon as you send a note to the Office, someone is there within a couple of minutes. The problem doesn't get a chance to escalate within the classroom because we deal with it straight away. I've been to other schools where you can send three cards and nothing happens.

Strong caring leadership was also a major source of personal support for all teachers. The following excerpts are typical:

Melissa: Sharon (the principal) always makes herself available, always makes it known that she's there for you for that support. There have been incidents with parents where they have come storming in and Sharon has always supported her staff members. She has trust in us that we'll do the right thing. You never once feel like you're left floating by yourself and I think that makes a big difference.

Here Maria describes how the leadership team responded after a particularly distressing incident:

Maria: [The leadership team] definitely cared. This was the first time I saw it at this school - they actually cared. This was great. Not just 'Are you OK?' and that's the end of it, they were interested.

Int: So what does this caring look like?

Maria: They kept on asking whether I was OK. Asking questions, asking how I was feeling, whether I was happy [about the child's punishment]. Then when the child came off suspension they asked if I felt comfortable about this and whether I was happy to sit down and talk to him before he returned to the classroom. Just little things, worrying about how I felt and whether I'd be able to cope with his return to the classroom - whether I'd feel safe.

For regular, daily de-briefing about minor issues and incidents all staff turned to trusted colleagues. Here the support seems to be less about solving problems and debriefing about major incidents and more about sharing experiences. Trusted colleagues can boost morale because they know what you are going through and, as Melissa says below, can help 'keep your spirits up'. These excerpts are typical:

Rob: I'm pretty much independent but I know I could turn to any member of staff and they'd all have a very good listening ear and be very supportive. I think you find that pretty much in the schools out here. The staff are very, very supportive, very work-team oriented.

Cathy: Other teachers in the school are [a source of support]. You can have a bit of a joke with them and I think that helps - laugh it off a bit. You can walk next door or to whoever you get along with at school and have a bit of a scream - 'I can't believe this happened!!' and have a bit of a joke and it does make you feel better.

Leanne: Probably the people that I've got around me [are my main source of support]. I feel really happy with the people I'm working with and I know that there's quite a few people I can go and talk to if anything happened or just have a whinge to or that sort of stuff.

Melissa: Colleagues [are my main source of support]. At the end of the day it's the people around you, the people you work with, who help keep you going and help keep your spirits up.

Teresa: [In all the schools I've been to] the very best thing is that I've always been able to develop fairly decent relationships with people. So I'll come in, make working relationships and friendships to some extent. So I always thought I could go to somebody and say 'Hey, this is happening' or 'This is what I want to do, what do you think?' I think that's the one thing that really gets you through. You

know, once you talk it through with somebody it never seems as bad as what you make it in your head.

All three schools are fairly isolated, being around 25 kilometres from the centre of the city. Of the teachers in this study, none lived in the immediate locality and most lived a considerable distance away, requiring a journey of up to 45 minutes. While in other studies geographic isolation has been a source of stress for teachers, in this study it turned out to be a strength. Several teachers talked about car-pooling with colleagues and how this provided a valuable opportunity to debrief and 'down load' the day before getting home. Those who drove independently also claimed that the long drive home from work was beneficial in so far as it enabled them to calmly go over the day while listening to favourite music. By the time they arrived home they claim they had dealt with any school-related stress.

Resilience: competence and a sense of achievement

The final protective factor that we found both in our previous work and in the present study concerns pride in achievement and a sense of one's own competence in areas of personal importance or significance. For these teachers the two factors were often linked. Because they were competent at behaviour management and teaching, their students learnt in orderly classrooms. Because they were patient and good at forging relationships with difficult children, their students made demonstrable progress. Our insights into this dimension of resilience came mainly from asking our participants if there was anything of which they were particularly proud. Here are some of the responses:

Melissa: This kid was having a really hard time and I really feel that we did make progress in terms of his learning, in terms of his behaviour, in terms of his relationships, in communication - all that stuff. So, I guess, when it comes to the relationships that develop with students it's something that I feel quite proud of - that I can be someone that they feel they can trust and approach.

Karen: [I'm proud of the way I handle things]. I think you have to have very clear expectations of the kids from Day One. You need to be very consistent with your behaviour management and kids need to see that they're all getting the same treatment. I think building positive relationships with the kids and the parents is really vital because a lot of the parents have had very negative school experiences so if you can build some positive part into it that's good. Hopefully then you'll get more parent involvement too.

Leanne: It's weird. I'm proud of the fact that I can work here, that I can work with these children and that I have made achievements in my classroom and my kids are reading and are moving up the levels in their reading. And this is despite maybe not having literate parents that read with them at home every night and not having books at home and not having that support system at home.

Cathy: [I'm proud of the fact that] my kids are reading exceptionally well. I also won the Coordinator's position this

year so I was pretty happy with that because that's the first time I've ever really done anything other than classroom teaching. So that was really good.

When we asked our participants what advice they would give to an inexperienced teacher thinking of applying for a position in a hard-to-staff school they focussed on issues of competence, often reflecting their own strengths in this area:

Leanne: I would say first of all if you're not like ... I'm a bit pedantic about my organization and being prepared. If you're not organized and if for one minute it looks like you're not prepared for what you're going to do for that day, that week, that month, the kids will smell that you're not on top of things and they will run away with it. You have to establish your routines. If they don't know what's going to happen, I don't know whether they get scared or they get insecure, but that's when they start to act up and things go wrong. I try to establish routines really early and try not to change them so the kids know what to expect each day. I try to be consistent with everything that we're doing. Even with the praise that you give and the rewards and then your logical consequences and how you handle behaviour. I try to always be consistent so that the kids know you're a fair person. You have to gain their respect that way.

Kim: You have to have highly developed behaviour management skills out here. Without them you won't last a week. I've seen it happen.

Teresa: You need to be very organized because as soon as the kids see you're not ready, they'll run riot. So I guess being organized and having that stuff done is very important.

Rob: You need to have a really positive outlook on life. You need to learn to laugh about things and deal with problems straight away. Don't hold problems in and don't take them on board personally. I think once you start to do that, that can be your downfall. You need to look at problems reflectively though. There may be something that you could be doing differently, that would improve the situation or prevent it from happening again.

Conclusion

The concept of social resilience, which has largely been developed in work with children and adolescents, appears to have relevance for adults too. Three key protective factors, which emerged in our work with Australian children, were very evident in the talk of the teachers in hard-to-staff schools who volunteered for this study.

A sense of agency, a strong support group, pride in achievements and competence in areas of personal importance are all major protective factors and were all strong features of our participants' talk. In terms of Kyriacou's two categories (Kyriacou 2001), our teachers were definitely into Direct Action when it came to handling work-related stress.

We asked our teachers whether they thought their resilience was innate or learnt. Apart from some speculation about whether such qualities as patience might be innate, all our teachers firmly believed they had learnt the strategies and dispositions that made them resilient. Melissa, whose own childhood had been similar to that experienced by many of her students, said she'd learnt her resilience early on and had simply transferred those skills to adult life. Others claimed they had learnt what skills they needed to survive through quiet reflection on their practice (usually when things went wrong). They then developed their coping skills through trial and error. All of them could remember being mentored by some more experienced or senior colleague.

As with our work with children, what we have learnt is that the protective factors that make a real difference in people's lives are earth-shatteringly simple and easy to provide. Here are some of our suggestions:

- The strategy of de-personalising stressful incidents is a simple one that senior staff and colleagues in any school can teach new teachers and that students can be taught in their teacher education courses.
- With School Choice options, principals of hard-to-staff schools can ensure that new staff actually want the challenge of a difficult school - that they have what we've called a moral purpose in their choice of work setting.
- All schools can organize strong and reliable whole-school behaviour management strategies that will support teachers both in everyday and emergency situations.
- Leadership teams in all schools can make support of staff in both professional and personal issues a priority.
- All schools can be organized in such a way as to promote strong peer group support (e.g. work-teams, social activities, supportive rather than competitive school culture). Students in training can be alerted to the importance of developing strong peer support both within school and outside.
- Staff achievements should be celebrated and they should be valued through promotions etc.
- The critical importance of competence in the key areas of behaviour management, program organization, lesson preparation and the effective management of resources can be taught both in teacher education programs and on the job.

Not all schools are hard-to-staff, but all schools present their own particular challenges. Teachers in the 'leafy suburbs' schools are prone to stress and burn-out just as those in disadvantaged areas are - you don't necessarily need to be hit in the face by a 5 year old to doubt whether you are in the right profession! The value of this study is that by researching the extreme case of hard-to-staff schools, valuable strategies for survival for all teachers are identified. We have shown, moreover, that the things that can make a difference to teachers' working lives can be learnt and that those opportunities for learning are easily within the power of individual schools, education bureaucracies and teacher education faculties to provide.

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