Resilience strategies for new teachers in high-needs areas

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A growing teacher shortage, especially in high-needs urban and rural schools and in fields like special education, is becoming a pressing concern for many countries (Gorard, See, Smith, & White, 2007; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; White & Smith, 2005). In fact, a U-shaped pattern of attrition exists, in which new teachers and older teachers leave the profession at faster rates (Guarino et al., 2006; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001). Researchers allude to a plethora of reasons why new teachers leave the profession, ranging from pursuing another career, seeking higher pay or better benefits, childbearing, lack of authority at school, needing more time for self and family, and feeling dissatisfied with teaching (Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). McCann and Johannesen (2004) discovered that teachers who were likely to leave the profession reported feeling that the workload was unreasonable or unmanageable, that their efforts were futile, that their needs were not being met, or that choosing teaching was a compromise rather than the career of choice. In addition, researchers pinpoint the school context, which may lack resources, professional-development opportunities, parent involvement, and community support systems, as a major culprit in teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Scherff, 2008; Smethem, 2007). Finally, fields like special education assert additional demands and burdens on beginning teachers, ranging from increased administrative duties to issues of meeting the diverse special needs of students (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

As a way of decreasing the exodus of new teachers from the profession, many scholars advocate reducing school-based stressors and incorporating mentoring and induction programmes. Darling-Hammond (2003) persuaded school leaders to make an investment in competitive salaries, provide adequate resources, hire qualified teachers, and incorporate a solid mentoring programme. Likewise, Colgan (2004) urged school administrators to “listen” to teachers, who reported needing an accessible mentor, collaboration with faculty, support with discipline issues, and an encouraging Principal (Head of School). McCann, Johannesen, and Ricca (2005) stressed the importance of assigning teachers appropriate teaching assignments, offering a comprehensive induction process, facilitating collegial networking and supportive evaluation, and preparing novice teachers for the challenges that they might face by discussing common issues encountered by new teachers.

These strategies attempt to either alter negative working conditions or to provide additional resources for beginning teachers. However, Williams (2003) observed that “many teachers are affected by the same conditions that contribute to their colleagues leaving the profession but chose to stay” (p. 74). These teachers exhibit qualities of resilience. Broadly defined, resilience refers to the “ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one’s competence in the face of adverse conditions” (Bobek, 2002, p. 202). While the teacher education literature has addressed ways to improve the school context for beginning teachers, few researchers have explored how...
teachers employ resilience strategies in challenging contexts. Furthermore, the literature fails to investigate the subtleties of teacher resilience in hard-to-staff urban and rural schools and in the field of special education, specifically for first-year teachers. The purpose of this paper is to report on a qualitative study of fifteen beginning teachers who taught in high-needs areas and who practised resilience strategies when dealing with the many problems they confronted during their first year of teaching. Here, we illuminate the adaptive process these beginning teachers undertook to overcome adversity and to sustain their commitments to teaching.

1. Teacher resilience and agency

Gu and Day (2007) discussed two trends in defining resilience. First, resilience as a psychological construct incorporates the study of personal factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, resourcefulness, and health, which are believed to assist individuals to be resilient in the face of adversity. This approach seeks to identify attributes which describe a resilient person. The second approach views resilience as a multidimensional and complex process, “a dynamic within a social system of interrelationships” (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305). These relationships include a series of protective factors, or buffers, that minimise the impact of an adverse situation or event (Kumpfer, 1999). Protective factors incorporate not only personal factors, but also external support systems, such as friends and community resources. In addition to protective factors, resilience in this second approach is oftentimes viewed as a process by which individuals negotiate and overcome challenges in the normal process of living (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Kumpfer, 1990).

We have found only a handful of studies that explore teacher resilience, most of which emphasises the role of protective factors, identifying either personal attributes or environmental conditions of resilient teachers. In a qualitative study of ten inner-city teachers, Stanford (2001) concluded that resilient teachers derived deep personal satisfaction in their work and relied on an extensive network of support involving teacher colleagues, family and friends, and church groups. Likewise, Williams (2003) found that the twelve just experienced teachers in her study drew strength from their joy of teaching and also sought to improve themselves through professional development. Brunetti (2006) described the personal qualities of experienced inner-city teachers, acknowledging the “heart” of these teachers that enabled them to want to teach underprivileged students and work towards social justice. Finally, based on a study of 300 experienced teachers in England, Gu and Day (2007) identified three scenarios that describe how teachers balanced their personal identities, school situations, and professional values and beliefs throughout their teaching career. In the first scenario the resilient teacher sought balance among these three components; whereas, in the other two scenarios one or more of these components either became dominant or teachers could not manage any of these areas. Gu and Day (2007) offered three stories that illustrate the interconnected role of both personal and environmental factors on the resilience of experienced teachers.

These recent studies on resilience highlight the importance of protective factors that help to buffer the effects of adversity; however, more attention must be given to the process of overcoming adversity. Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) defined resilience as “using energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adverse conditions [emphasis in original]” (p. 3). In their study of eight experienced teachers, they identified strengths and strategies that teachers rely on in the face of adversity, including decision-making, seeking professional development, problem-solving, relying on friends and colleagues, and being flexible. Here the focus shifts from attributes and environmental conditions to actual strategies that experienced teachers employ when confronting challenges. This shift illuminates how resilience occurs as a process of adaptation. A central component here, productive energy, implies that teachers exhibit agency in overcoming adversity. By agency, we share Lasky’s (2005) view that agency “starts with the belief that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are also shaped by social and individual factors” (p. 900). Hence, the strategy orientation of Patterson et al. (2004) suggests the importance of agency on the part of the teacher. Unfortunately, we have found no other studies on teacher resilience that explored strategies of resilience and agency. Furthermore, researchers have yet to study how beginning teachers utilise strategies of resilience and act as agents to overcome conditions of adversity.

As part of this study, we assert a belief that resilience is a process which occurs throughout the normal lifespan of a person (Richardson et al., 1990; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995). Our view of resilience as a process relies on a model of resilience in which individuals employ specific strategies when they experience disruption and anxiety as a result of an adverse situation (Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Richardson et al., 1990). These resilience strategies allow a person to overcome the adversity and gain new insights which minimise the impact of that adversity for future encounters. Our position on resilience borrows from both the multidimensional approach described by Gu and Day (2007) and the strategy orientation of Patterson et al. (2004). This approach to resilience offers several advantages for teacher educators, school administrators, and teacher mentors. First, we see teachers as active agents, adopting various strategies to find balance and achievement in the face of adversity, often caused by minimal resources and challenging working conditions. Second, identifying resilience as a process suggests that all teachers practice a variety of resilience strategies. Thus, our focus here centres not on key attributes of the teacher or resources in the environment, but on strategies teachers employ. These strategies may inform ways in which teacher educators and mentors support novice teachers. Finally, our position on resilience enables us to identify strategies of resilience found in the struggles and accomplishments of beginning teachers, not just experienced teachers.

In this study, we sought to describe resilience strategies employed by first-year teachers in high-needs areas. We investigated the following research questions:

- What strategies do new teachers employ in response to adverse situations?
- What resources do beginning teachers rely on to overcome challenges and obstacles to teaching?

These questions delve into an area not pursued in the literature on teacher resilience and new teacher retention.

2. Contexts of the study

Participants for this qualitative, interpretative study included fifteen first-year teachers in various high-needs areas who were interviewed between May and September of 2007. Participants included five rural teachers, five urban teachers, and five special education teachers. The five rural teachers taught in a hard-to-staff rural community, consisting of a low-income and culturally diverse population. These rural teachers were recruited in April and May through e-mail with the support of local school officials. These teachers were interviewed in May and June. The five urban teachers were recruited with the support of a large urban school district and were contacted by e-mail in August at the end of their first year of teaching. Interviews with urban teachers were conducted in summer after their first year of teaching or early into their second year, between August and September. Finally, the five special education teachers were recruited through their affiliation with a large research university.
located in the Southwestern portion of the United States. These special education teachers taught in primarily suburban areas. They were interviewed in the summer following their first year of teaching.

While all the rural teachers participating in the study were secondary teachers, nearly all the special education teachers taught at the elementary, or primary, level. The urban teachers included three elementary/primary teachers and two secondary teachers. Furthermore, while all the special education teachers graduated from a traditional undergraduate programme, the majority of teachers in both the urban and rural districts were being certified through various alternative teacher certification programmes. Because these two districts faced teacher shortages, alternative certification routes provided additional recruitment options for these schools. Overall, participants represented a variety of subject areas, such as science, mathematics, art, Latin, life skills, and bilingual education. Our diverse sample reflects our attempt to recruit a cross-section of various teachers in high-needs areas for this study, so as to glean insights from the data that would have a broad significance for a variety of beginning teachers.

The researchers conducted interviews lasting roughly between one hour to ninety minutes long with each participant either in the participant’s classroom or at a neutral site, such as a coffee shop or local library. During the interviews, we asked participants to describe at least two different challenges or major concerns they faced during their first year of teaching, the internal and external resources the participant relied upon to cope with these challenges, and the strategies she or he employed to overcome the obstacles encountered. In many cases, the participants discussed several issues. As researchers, we focused primarily on the patterns of strategies employed by the teachers given the context in which they encountered the adversity. Using a semi-structured interview protocol offered the best way for us to probe deeply into the participant’s perspectives and concerns of their first year of teaching (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998). After participants elaborated on two or three specific issues, we soon realised that participants tended to rely on a consistent set of strategies when facing issues and after three rounds of retracting the adversity they faced, participants repeated their strategies described earlier in the interview. We felt that our data collection provided sufficient data to conduct our analysis.

The interviews were transcribed and coded using a constant-comparative method. First, we initially coded transcripts into the categories of adversity or problem faced, resources relied on by participant, specific strategy employed by participant, and the outcome of the strategy employed. Then, we combed through the data again, seeking to identify instances of agency and adaptation, indicators of resilience process undergone by participants. Third, using a constant-comparative method, we attempted to identify themes occurring within each group of teachers (urban, rural, special education) and began comparing themes across groups to see trends occurring in the data (Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To assist in this process, we created a grid to help organise and compare findings across the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As multiple researchers, we each coded the data independently using the above process. Afterwards, we met as a team to reach consensus about the nature of our findings. Themes arising out of our analysis of the data juxtaposed with and enhanced our theoretical understanding of resilience as a process that involves not only the use of internal and external resources, or buffers, but also various strategies (Kumpfer, 1999; Richardson et al., 1990).

3. Findings

Participants in this study dealt with a variety of issues during their first year of teaching. In particular, urban and rural teachers reported problems with the intensive bureaucratic demands (paperwork, grading, meetings, non-instructional activities), curriculum delivery, parent communication, and classroom management. Special education teachers expressed feelings of isolation and trouble negotiating relationships with colleagues and parents. Several participants described a lack of material resources and support from school administrators. Although differences exist in the context across these three groups, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on resilience strategies that apply to all groups and contexts of the participants. These strategies include: help-seeking, problem-solving, managing difficult relationships, and seeking rejuvenation/renewal.

3.1. Help-seeking

The process of asking for help may be difficult for beginning teachers. Francis, who teaches 9 and 10-year-olds (U.S. fourth grade) in an urban district, summarised the issues involved in help-seeking:

You don’t get a lot of help; well, you have to ask for it...Nobody is going to stretch out their hand to help me unless I go tell them, “Help me.” That’s really hard, because as a new teacher, you want to appear like you know what you are doing.

Here, Francis described the tension between appearing competent and acquiring necessary support from colleagues and administrators. A culture of isolation (Lortie, 1975) oftentimes surrounds new teachers as they struggle with their own problems and issues within the confines of their classrooms. For this reason, help-seeking, or the act of seeking assistance from others, becomes a way of self-preservation, of establishing one’s own resilience. Help-seeking requires the novice teacher to work with others in order to attain needed information and resources. For the participants in this study, help-seeking strategies involved seeking “adopted” mentors, advocating for resources, and acquiring allies to resolve problems.

Despite the best intentions of mentoring programmes, relationships with a mentor can fail to provide meaningful support for the beginning teacher. For example, Emily, a special education teacher, described how her mentor had little experience with special education and provided only “positive words even if she didn’t quite know about the problems.” In some cases, participants felt their mentors offered little help or were neglectful. Betsy, an urban teacher of 7 and 8-year-olds (U.S. 2nd grade), stated seeing her mentor only once, “when she came she told me everything like in ten minutes.” Likewise, Rayne, a special education teacher, reported that her mentor offered negative advice and even attacked her for not giving special attention to her teacher friend who requested a special education student be removed from a classroom.

Participants with difficult mentoring relationships sought out their own “adopted” mentors. For example, Stacy, a rural high school Spanish teacher, explained that when her mentor was just too busy to assist her with an irate parent, she “walked from classroom to classroom and talked to the other teachers” to seek advice. Stacy elaborated on her approach to seeking mentors:

I had other teachers who would give me advice, and I would just kind of latch onto them with things. So I actually kind of have some adopted mentors. I didn’t realise that they were my mentors, but they became them.

Other participants also searched for “adopted” mentors. Betsy connected with her team leader and requested that the school administrator switch her mentor. In some cases, beginning teachers found mentorship outside the school campus. Elizabeth, an urban high school English teacher, approached her mother, an experienced primary/elementary school teacher, for guidance. Emily and Raynie turned to other professionals, such as a behavioral specialist,
school district coordinator, or other special education teachers, some working in different schools within the school district. Each of these teachers initiated their own search for mentorship.

Advocating for resources represented another important form of help-seeking among beginning teachers. Teachers reported finding ways to acquire needed resources. For example, Kendra, a middle school special education mathematics teacher, related how her greatest challenge was finding math materials for her special education students. She consistently met with general education mathematics teachers to request copies of their curriculum materials. Steven, an urban middle-school teacher, and Kimberly, a special education teacher, best illustrated the process of advocating for resources.

A second-career teacher and retired military sergeant, Steven worked as a science teacher in an alternative middle school for students who exhibited extremely disruptive behaviors and had to be removed from their regular school setting. Although his enrollment began with four to five students, by December the class size reached 45 students. Despite the class size, Steven stated that “there wasn’t one approved...science textbook in the seventh or eighth grade in that school.” According to him, the school district held to a strict “one book, one child” policy, whereby the schools were issued only one book for each child. The home schools that sent these students to the alternative center refused to send the books with them, leaving Steven in a bind. Rather than sit back and suffer, Steven initiated his own advocacy programme. “For me, it’s standing up for myself. I’ve got to stand up and fight for myself... You have to fight for your resources,” he said. Steven reflected on his strategy.

You’ve got certain strengths and tools that you can use, limited compared to others, but you make a nuisance of yourself. I went right to it—started with the Vice Principal, didn’t get any effect, went to the Principal, didn’t get any effect. Got people saying, “yeah, we’ll do this.” [I] went higher up, and the next thing you know they are finding the money to do things...If you need to accomplish something, do it. Tell them you’re going to do it. Go up the chain of command; you let them know that you’re going to talk to someone else about it.

Steven’s strategy of advocating for resources demonstrates the importance of tenacity. He persistently communicated his needs until he spoke directly to the Assistant Superintendent. He admitted that advocating for oneself and one’s resources is “not something that normally a first-year teacher would know” and may have come with his age and experience. “It’s very, very hard for a young person to be that assertive though...if they haven’t had experience.” Despite Steven’s claim, beginning teachers may advocate for resources in sometimes simple ways, such as asking a Principal or Head of School for assistance.

Kimberly, a special education teacher—nearly half the age of Steven—proved that she too could advocate for resources. Kimberly taught in an early intervention special education programme for children, ages 3–5 years-old. Several of these children were diagnosed with self-injurious behaviors towards themselves and others. Yet, at the beginning of the year, she only had one teacher’s aid. She described the situation, “One of my children would be out with my assistant and I would be alone with three or two of them [with] intense self-injury behaviors, and one was set off by the other ones. They will attack each other.” She realised that “advocating for myself to get someone else in there for the safety of myself and the students” was her responsibility. Like Steven, Kimberly approached the school administration. She first collected data on the frequency of these outbursts. Then, after researching the legal issues associated with special education, she presented her findings and the legal issues to her school level administration, where she received support. By the middle of the year, she had acquired two additional teacher aids to assist her at various times during the day.

Finally, participants also acquired allies to help solve various problems. Raynie, a special education teacher, discussed the role of seeking help from the right people, “I’m not going to the reading mastery teacher to figure out what to do with a kid who’s having issues with behavior; I’m going to the specialists.” Several participants turned to others for assistance in solving issues with classroom management. Heather, a rural middle-school teacher, went to the athletic coach. Because many of her students were on athletic teams, she said to the coach, “Look, here’s what I’ve done in my classroom, it’s not working. Please make them [disruptive students] run, make them do something.” Others, acquired help in other areas. Laura, a rural Latin teacher, met with a curriculum specialist who taught Russian languages for teaching ideas. Elizabeth, an urban English teacher, turned to her team leader to intervene when an irate parent constantly harassed her. These teachers utilised colleagues and administrators as resources for overcoming obstacles.

Help-seeking as a resilience strategy requires beginning teachers to take the initiative to find support when there is a lack of resources. Although some may argue that teachers should not have to advocate for time, resources, or even support for the daily tasks of teaching, these teachers recognised that the resources and support would not automatically come to them. Though well-meaning, colleagues and administrators get lost in the frenzied demands of the workplace, forgetting to offer help and assistance or assuming that the novice teacher already knows the information needed to teach in that context. Francis’s conversation with her mentor illustrated this point. She asked her mentor teacher, “Could you please not assume that I know what you are talking about [school procedures]?” Her mentor teacher replied, “I’m going to assume you know if you don’t ask me.” Thus, the burden for success falls on the shoulders of the beginning teacher; help-seeking, in the form of seeking “adopted” mentors, advocating for resources, and acquiring allies to resolve problems, begins with the novice teacher taking agency.

3.2. Problem-solving

The act of teaching involves constant problem-solving. What am I going to teach? How am I going to reach this student or that student? How do I approach this irate parent? Indeed, all the resilience strategies described in this article in some form address a problem situation. For the purposes of this paper, problem-solving refers to the specific process participants utilised to resolve problems or dilemmas in the classroom. Unlike help-seeking which relies exclusively on gaining the support of others in order to acquire resources and information, problem-solving techniques do not necessarily require assistance from others and may be geared towards broader concerns in the classroom. Teachers in this study approached problem-solving in three different ways: trial and error, consulting others, and researching alternatives.

The trial and error approach represented the most common strategy employed by new teachers. Trial and error methods usually consisted of teachers attempting to figure things out on their own. Emily, a special education teacher, illustrated a typical problem-solving approach:

[A co-teacher] sat down with me and gave me some ideas on just how to execute some of the behaviour things...that I had not seen in my student teaching that were helpful...I mean they were just ideas and I kind of tried them and if it didn’t seem to work, I just kind of improvised. It seemed like the whole year was a kind of learning process, like let me try this way...I was just constantly [changing], I would try and see what worked and what didn’t.

Although Emily began with support from a co-teacher, she explored a variety of options in her classroom. As Lynn, another special education teacher, described, “it’s just being able to look
through the problems and think how I would...on my own [solve them]." Lynn admitted she was "stubborn" and "strong-willed." Trial and error methods, though useful as an initial strategy, often led to other problems. For example, when Heather, a rural middle-school teacher, implemented different behavior plans in her classroom, she reported that her students became confused and frustrated by the constant changes. Furthermore, trial and error methods reinforce the notion that the teacher can figure it out on her own, cutting off possibilities for collaboration and garnering additional resources.

The second problem-solving approach, consulting others, mirrors many of the concepts of help-seeking strategies above. As Michael, a rural high school mathematics teacher, summarised, consulting others involves "asking questions, asking supervisors, asking questions." Unlike trial and error methods, consulting others creates opportunities for beginning teachers to learn from the expertise of other individuals. Furthermore, many teachers not only consulted experts, but also other beginning teachers. Kimberly, a special education teacher, described her interaction with a group of first-year teacher friends, "[we] would just talk about the situation we were in and, you know, bounce a lot of ideas [off each other]...It is nice to have...other people in...in your field to be able to talk about things with." Consulting others offers opportunities to develop new strategies, to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various teaching techniques, and to learn from the experiences of others.

The final problem-solving strategy, researching alternatives, involves a specific problem-solving process. Two teachers provide an illustration of this approach. First, Laura, a Latin teacher, explained her problem-solving process in dealing with classroom management issues: "So I thought, let's look at the kids, what are the problems exactly I'm having." Here Laura wrote down the specific behavior issues exhibited by her students. She then consulted the students' former teachers. "I talked to a lot of other teachers that had them [students] before and I asked what are the strategies that worked with this kid? What can I do to get them to focus on this?" After acquiring alternative approaches for these students, Laura finally developed ways to incorporate these strategies in her classroom: "I would sit down with [my] seating chart, make notes, move the kids around so they wouldn't talk to each other, and just keep going at it." Here, Laura went through a series of methodological steps to reach a workable solution to the problem she encountered.

Likewise, Kendra, a special education, middle school mathematics teacher, undertook a specific process, one that required her to utilise various resources. Because Kendra did not have mathematics textbooks for her special education students who were below grade level, she wanted to develop and tailor a mathematics curriculum for her students.

So some of what I did was just going to other teachers seeing what does it [mathematics instruction] look like on grade level, what's difficult typically for kids on grade level? So knowing what the norms were for each grade level was really difficult. Also the district has an online curriculum. So going to their curriculum, seeing what [mathematics] problems look like. Also, I spent a lot of time going to the [state education board] website, pulling their [standardised] tests, pulling the previous released tests, copying problems, making problems that look like that. So, it was lots of time pulling up those websites, finding things online.

Kendra used a variety of resources in order to develop her curriculum. She asked teachers, researched the state standards, and analysed standardized test questions. With this information, she determined what mathematics instruction should look like at that specific grade level and used this to assess how her students were performing in relation to others. She designed her curriculum to help her students improve their mathematics skills. This methodological approach to problem-solving requires teachers to explore and utilise a variety of resources both inside and outside the school context.

Teachers who develop advanced problem-solving strategies identify resources in the school and community in order to solve problems. In addition, advanced problem-solving can assist teachers to develop new resources. For example, Nancy explained how she overcame not having enough teaching materials for her class of 5 and 6 year-olds at a primary urban school by using the Internet, "I type in a skill or content area that I want to research...Like in math[ematics], say, there's a skill in math[s] I need to teach, regrouping numbers. You click on regrouping and they [websites] give you a list of literature you can use...Resources, you know." Although most teachers utilise a trial and error method, learning more advanced problem-solving techniques, such as researching alternatives, may prove most useful for novice teachers.

3.3. Managing difficult relationships

Several participants reported concerns managing difficult relationships with adults inside and outside their schools. While rural and urban teachers related issues with mostly irate parents, special education teachers also encountered difficulty with co-teachers, teacher assistants, and school administrators. Unlike most regular education teachers, special education teachers must collaborate with an array of other professionals, increasing opportunities for conflict to arise in their day-to-day lives. This context, coupled with being a novice teacher, often prompted participants to seek strategies to manage conflicts in their relationships with co-workers. Kimberly, a special education teacher, explained, "That is so hard, you know, a lot of the times, they [the teacher assistant] have children close to my age." Being younger than many of their colleagues, special education teachers expressed concerns with being taken seriously or fending for themselves. Although significant differences exist in managing relationships with colleagues and with parents, we identified strategies used by beginning teachers that apply to both situations. These strategies include seeking buffers and allies, avoiding encounters with difficult others, and collecting documentation.

Seeking buffers and allies for antagonising relationships represented the most used strategy for dealing with difficult adults. For example, Elizabeth, an urban high school English teacher, recalled her experiences with a difficult parent of a special needs student.

The parent was unbelievably overbearing, very confrontational, inappropriate, just neurotic...This woman was e-mailing me six or seven times a day as a teacher and it was just disturbing. I literally had an anxiety attack about this woman, and it affected every round of my existence at that time, emotionally being a teacher.

Elizabeth turned to co-teachers, administrators, and special education support staff for help. Elizabeth described how colleagues "told me who the right people to go to [were], to kind of buffer between this woman and myself." Finding a buffer involves recruiting another professional to help minimise the impact of a negative relationship. Elizabeth felt finding a buffer was part of her "steps to protect myself." Likewise, Stacy, a rural teacher, illustrated the importance of recruiting buffers when meeting with irate parents. "In one case, I had a counsellor be there as a buffer. Now, I always have an administrator besides myself at any of these meetings." Here the buffer helped to establish support for the teacher and decrease the possibility of continued conflict.

These buffers also serve as allies for the beginning teacher. For example, Raynie described how the antagonism of her team leader led her to seek support from other teachers: "I was actually really good friends with two other people on my team, and I would talk to them, like 'How do I handle this situation? What would you do?'" These co-teachers attempted to serve as buffers for her during
meetings and other encounters. In addition to recruiting friends as allies and buffers, Lynn, a special education teacher, demonstrated the importance of creating alliances with certain administrators. Lynn employed a “kill-them-with-kindness” strategy to win over her Assistant Principal. “I was very sweet to her, and I’d say kind of like overly sweet things, which I think really helped in the long run.” Recruiting buffers and allies represents an opportunity for beginning teachers to garner additional resources and expertise in managing difficult relationships with others, whether they are parents or co-workers.

Avoidance emerged as another strategy for managing difficult adult relationships. Aside from simply avoiding interaction with the difficult person, teachers also used two avoidance techniques. First, teachers often referred the adversarial person to a buffer. When a co-teacher confronted Raynie about her unwillingness to remove a special education student from the regular classroom, she referred this teacher to the head of the school special education department, who had previously agreed to support her when dealing with this teacher. In a similar fashion, Elizabeth forwarded e-mails and calls of the neurotic parent to the special education department or school administrators, not even answering or responding to these disruptive communication attempts. Second, some teachers maneuvered around the difficult person especially if the person was an administrator or a person of power. Lynn had trouble gaining support from her Vice Principal for curriculum materials. She learned who in the chain of command would be able to support her. Then she “bypassed my Vice Principal and I went to the person that I needed to talk to, and I got it [the curriculum materials] right away.” The ability to sidestep a difficult person requires the beginning teacher to discover alternative pathways and resources for acquiring needed resources or support. Avoidance of difficult individuals may provide beginning teachers with some relief from potential conflict and adversity; however, avoidance rarely offers beginning teachers new insight, skills, or abilities to alter the impact of these negative relationships.

Only a few teachers collected documentation as a strategy for managing difficult relationships. Unlike seeking buffers or avoiding encounters with difficult others, these beginning teachers used documentation to decrease the impact and improve the outcome of meeting with an antagonistic person. Stacy, a rural teacher, described the importance of collecting and using documentation as “building a good case, like a lawyer. You’re in the public eye, you have everything on paper for people to see, and then meeting face to face with the parent, I think it helps.” Here, referring to documentation during a meeting or an encounter can actually serve as a buffer for the beginning teacher. Kimberly offers an example of the use of documentation. As a special education teacher, she manages conflict with parents and colleagues over levels of service provided for special education students. Therefore, Kimberly carries a notebook with her and takes notes every time I talk to a parent...taking notes when I talk to any certain general education teachers so that if something ever arises, I could be like, “On this day and time, we’ve talked about this.” So just kind of making sure that I have backup, you know, to make sure [of] that, because we also have some problems with other professionals.

Having documentation provided Kimberly a way to transform the nature of her encounters with upset teachers or parents. She described her method for using documentation to prepare for a meeting with an antagonistic general education teacher who questioned her policies regarding her intervention for a special education student:

I started to make a list, you know. This is what we were doing, and you told me to do this. And this is why we were doing it, and here is what the law says about it...[Having documentation] helped me go back to the facts, you know, because emotions can soar out of control and my initial reaction [was] just like, just wanting[ing] to cry...Instead, I could just be very calm and say, “Here is the data to prove this and this is what we are doing. This is why, and this is according to the law. I’m sorry you are feeling like this, but this is something we will have to work through.” [Documentation] helped me just take a step back and cool off.

Collecting and using documentation in the way that Kimberly described here requires additional work and effort. However, like researching alternatives as a problem-solving method, documentation appears to offer additional resources, such as a means to establish credibility and legitimacy and a way to distance oneself emotionally from a negative encounter.

Difficult relationships with parents and colleagues can produce tremendous amounts of stress for the beginning teacher. Seeking buffers and allies, avoiding the negative person, and collecting documentation offer some ways to cope and overcome the challenges presented by others at the workplace.

3.4. Seeking rejuvenation and renewal

Many participants described the work involved in teaching as overwhelming. For example, Lynn spoke about how non-instructional tasks can steal time away from planning lessons. “At the end of the day, when you’re trying to lesson plan...I have to go and talk to this person or I have to fill out this paperwork.” These minor tasks intensify the workload of the teacher. In addition to work duties, teaching also imposes emotional strains on the teacher. Arthur, a rural high school art teacher, elaborated on the emotional side of teaching:

[Teaching] is physically and emotionally draining. I’ve got a bunch of kids here that are falling on some hard times. I had a student that got arrested the other day for drug possession...Their failures are your failures, at least that is the way I feel. So, I really had to work hard to separate this life from my home life. I really had a hard time dealing with some of their personal problems.

However, despite such constraints, teachers consistently employed strategies to rejuvenate and renew. Finding rejuvenation and renewal became a central part of these teachers’ ability to sustain themselves throughout their first year of teaching. Rejuvenation and renewal strategies included finding balance between work and home life, caring for one’s personal, physical, and emotional well-being outside of the classroom, and obtaining satisfaction while teaching. Participants struggled to achieve balance between work and home life. The process of “drawing the line” allowed teachers to create a space for rejuvenation and renewal outside of the schoolhouse. Raynie’s strategy consisted of setting boundaries for work and home.

I tried to get all my work done at work. When I came home, that was home time with my family, and then I’d go out with my friends and not worry that I didn’t get work done...I don’t talk about work with my friends or my family. I talk about work to colleagues.

Many participants took a similar stance of leaving work for the workplace. However, Francis, a second-career urban primary school teacher, also expanded on the importance of knowing when to leave the workplace. Her mentor advised her, “You can only do so much, and then you need to go home.” Francis adopted a philosophy of self-preservation. “I’m not 22-years-old, so I do have more of a self-preservation [approach] than may be a much younger person...I was able to say, ‘That’s it. I’ve done the best that I can and I need to stop.’” Establishing balance between work and personal life fosters the ability of beginning teachers to practice self-preservation or self-care.
Participants developed ways to care for their personal, physical, and emotional well-being outside of the school context. Elizabeth related how she came to understand the importance of self-care. “The kids are only as good as you are,” she said. “If you are not a 100% for them, they are not going to be 100% for you.” She learned to take time to do “something fun.” For example, Elizabeth took horse-riding lessons, visited museums, and joined colleagues at a local bar for drinks. Kimberly also explored the activities for renewal outside of the school context: “I hung out with my friends and with my boyfriend. I read books that have nothing to do with education, [and], you know, just having T.V. shows to watch.” Other participants, like Nancy, an urban primary school teacher, worked out at the gym and interacted with her own children. Significantly, these teachers made conscious efforts to carve out space for their physical and mental health.

In addition to social and health activities, participants also spent time with teacher friends. These social gatherings not only provided outlets for renewal and rejuvenation, but created a space for teachers to share their experiences with others. Lynn, Raynie, and Kimberly, having all graduated from the same undergraduate university, met with three other new teachers on a weekly basis for potluck dinner. Although the group originally formed to coincide with a popular American television show appearing on Thursday evenings, these women also received support and a release from the stress of teaching. According to Lynne, “we would like [have] girl’s night once a week and kind of vent and problem-solve together. That was my major support.” In addition to problem-solving, Kimberly described the weekly group as forcing her to make time to be with friends.

Other participants reported similar experiences of creating support groups with other teachers. For example, Heather, a middle school rural teacher, had been taking certification courses with a cohort of teachers in her alternative certification programme. She discovered that she and her classmates bonded around social and educational issues. They compared situations and told stories about teaching. Emily, another special education teacher, also connected with two new teachers in her school district, going out to eat on occasion throughout the year. Through these social groups, beginning teachers created not only opportunities for renewal and rejuvenation, but important support systems.

Finally, beginning teachers obtained a sense of satisfaction while teaching. Most participants told stories of connecting with kids on a personal level. Stacy, an urban primary school teacher, reflected that “despite all the surprises [of teaching students] I really like kids, and I like the teaching. . .This year has been about getting to the relationship part.” Heather agreed, stating “I just really saw a different side of myself as far as being…proud of my students. It’s just weird how you learn to love these kids.” Moments when the beginning teacher seemed to reach a troubled student, such as when Arthur shared his love of music to bond with a formerly disruptive student, captured feelings of satisfaction and purpose felt by these participants. In addition to connecting with kids, beginning teachers reveled in feeling a sense of accomplishment while teaching. Betsey claimed, “When I was with students teaching, I was feeling really good at that time; when I was seeing that they were learning.” Likewise, Steven likened his teaching experience as a mission. “Aren’t those successes that you achieve taking care of yourself? Can you not recognise your own successes as value to you? I’m taking care of myself by completing my missions.” Steven’s mission included helping students be successful despite the difficulties that led them to be placed in the alternative school.

Seeking rejuvenation and renewal represents perhaps the most important resilience strategy. Beginning teachers must constantly refuel themselves by drawing on their own personal strengths and resources. Drawing lines between work and personal life, participating in activities that foster personal, emotional, and physical renewal, and finding satisfaction in teaching all help to create the space for a novice teacher to reaffirm their commitments to teaching and re-energise their will to succeed, to be resilient in the face of adversity.

4. Discussion

The notion that resilience can be understood as occurring within “social systems of interrelationships” (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305) becomes reinforced by the data in this study. The types of adversity experienced by participants ranged from managing relationships with others to confronting challenges in the organisation of the schools. These kinds of adversity remain consistent with research findings that suggest that the school conditions (e.g., levels of administrative support, paperwork, student communities, lack of resources, etc.) are the culprits in many schools for teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Loeb et al., 2005; Scherff, 2008). Taking a strategy orientation to our investigation of teacher resilience, we focus more on the ways in which beginning teachers adapt and implement resilience strategies despite their school contexts. The research literature surrounding teacher retention centres mostly on the school context. While understanding these components are essential to improving the experience of beginning teachers especially in high-needs areas, they often require substantial financial resources, policy changes, and long-term efforts, all of which are beyond the scope of most teacher educators, school administrators, and teacher mentors. We believe that resilience strategies provide avenues for beginning teachers to cope and sustain themselves given the current realities of their teaching context.

We have gleaned two important insights from this study about the process of teacher resilience. First, we acknowledge the fundamental role that the political and social organisation of the school plays in the experience of beginning teachers. Learning to teach can be viewed as a process of socialisation, in which beginning teachers adopt the norms of the school context (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). However, refusing to take a deterministic view of socialisation whereby the institutional forces overpower individual autonomy, Zeichner and Gore (1990) called for work that also explores the impact the novice teacher has on the school context. Kuzmic (1994) urged teacher educators to teach pre-service teachers organisational literacy, or how schools function as workplaces, so as to better prepare them to face and adapt to this socialisation process. Likewise, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) encouraged teaching pre-service teachers micro-political literacy, or the ability of the novice teacher to uncover the social-professional interests involved in their interactions with colleagues and administrators and to know how to respond appropriately to be successful within that context. Our work on resilience strategies can be seen as an extension of this research in that, like Kuzmic and Kelchtermans and Ballet, we offer strategies by which the beginning teacher can navigate and overcome pressures from the social context. Our view of resilience affirms the agency of teachers to transform negative aspects in their environment. Participants in this study demonstrated a variety of ways in which they strove to change the conditions of their teaching for the better.

Second, we note that resilience strategies, such as advocating for resources, seeking allies and buffers, and forming teacher peer groups, create new resources where none previously existed, but also expend energy from beginning teachers. Patterson et al. (2004) described resilience as “using energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adverse conditions [emphasis in the original]” (p. 3). Participants in this study dedicated energy and time to bring about the conditions necessary for them to teach. For example, Steven’s ability to demand that school textbooks be provided and Kimberly’s requests for more teacher aids in her special education classroom represent examples of persistence, effort, and productive energy. In this study, we see the resilient teacher as a resource-builder, not
accepting the current situation as it is, but recruiting others to assist in altering their work conditions. However, we also acknowledge that resilience strategies can place additional burdens on the beginning teacher. Although Steven and Kimberly were successful at acquiring resources (textbooks and additional teacher aids, respectively), they both took extra efforts to alter their conditions, intensifying their work without a guarantee of success for their initiatives. Likewise, while building strong and caring relationships with students can help teachers find satisfaction in the workplace, these deep connections can also present emotional burdens, as was the case for Arthur who struggled to put distance between his personal life and the problems encountered by his students.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest a variety of potential options for teacher educators, school administrators, and teacher mentors. First, problem-solving strategies and techniques must become an essential part of the novice teacher's training and experiences. Teacher educators may promote problem-solving through teaching case studies, guiding pre-service and beginning teachers through action research oriented projects, and encouraging more advanced methods of problem-solving. Second, teacher educators can also facilitate discussion about school as a workplace, exploring professionalism and ways to manage co-workers and parents. Third, teacher educators may foster peer-support groups by creating cohorts in teacher education and creating beginning teacher support teams within the school. Finally and most importantly, teacher educators and school leaders must provide an atmosphere that allows novice teachers to feel safe when they seek advice, guidance, and support.

The current study of nineteen novice teachers has given us insights into the application of resilience strategies for new teachers; however, our small sample of participants and the lack of diverse teaching contexts for participants evoke the need for continued research. For example, future work must address differences between successful teachers and unsuccessful teachers (those who leave the profession after the first year) and the gaps that exist in the ways in which they struggled with adversity, especially in the same or similar context. We also hope to draw out further distinctions between regular education teachers and special education teachers teaching in similar schools. Furthermore, additional studies may explore the role of life experiences, especially for first-career and teaching in similar schools. Furthermore, additional studies may explore the role of life experiences, especially for first-career and second-career teachers. Finally, the influence of personal attributes on strategy usage merits a research focus. We feel that extending the research on resilience and new teacher retention is paramount to conceiving a comprehensive approach to retaining today's new teachers in high-needs areas.

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