



## Studying Teacher Resilience: Nature and Conditions of Development of Resilience in Tertiary Teachers of Pakistan

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### Key Words

Teacher Resilience,  
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Development,  
Tertiary Education,  
Life Risk and  
Protective Factors

**Abstract** *This study explored the nature and conditions conducive to the development of resilience in tertiary teachers of Pakistan. The study employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Data was collected from five information-rich cases through the use of a life history approach to narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews. The data acquired was then subjected to linear and contrastive analysis to arrive at main themes or categories of resilience based on the commonalities in experience evident in the narratives of the research participants. The themes were the maturity and personal growth of the individual, the commitment to the profession, the role of mental strength and capabilities, leadership and authority positions, successful incidents of handling stress and challenges, setting personal standards for performance and success, the role of the expectations of significant other in decision making and the chance to create a new identity for oneself.*

## Introduction and Review of Related Literature

Teaching at its best is emotionally as well as intellectually demanding work requiring a high level of commitment. Levels of work-related stress, anxiety and depression are higher within education than within many other occupational groups. The stress and anxiety in teachers affect their interpersonal skills and relationships with peers and students. It also affects the internal classroom environment and the process of learning itself.

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The word 'resilience' has its basis in the Latin word 'resiliens'; referring to something pliant or elastic in quality (Greene et al., 2002). There is a vast body of research on resilience, but scholars and researchers have yet to agree to a single comprehensive definition of the phenomenon; they use multiple ways to define it (Carle & Chassin, 2004). Masten defines resilience as a 'class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes despite serious threats to the adaptation of development' (2005). The idea was presented that resilience is not a result of rare or special qualities of an individual 'but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities' (Patterson, et al, 2004). These factors have been studied under different labels and constructs such as attachment, authoritative parenting, intelligence, self-regulation, self-efficacy, pleasure-in-mastery, or intrinsic motivation (Andrews, et al 2008).

The investigations of researchers and academics such as Masten and Garmezy (1986) formed the basis for grounding resilience research and provided significant terms and concepts that frame the complex and dynamic process of the phenomenon that is resilience. Some of these terms are discussed in depth in the next section.

There are many ways to measure the occurrence and probability of influence of risk factors such as socio-economic status measures, the number of life events occurred over a recent period or a lifetime, low birth weight, separation or divorce, or massive trauma; or cumulative risk calculations that combine these different kinds of risk factors (Masten 2006).

Benard, (1995) has posited that many risk factors or indicators are arbitrarily labelled; they are not pure indicators of risk in all circumstances and contexts. Patterson, and Kelleher, (2005) said that Pure risk factors such as a car accident or a physical disability do occur, but most risk factors may be placed on a continuum, with positive outcomes or indicators placed at the other end (Lu, 2005). Similarly 'low income' and 'high income', 'high education' and 'low education' may be placed at opposite ends of a continuum of influential factors. Therefore, most risk gradients may be inverted to create a 'resource' or an 'asset' (Masten 2005); low risk on a risk gradient may indicate high assets or positive outcomes in many cases but the inverse relation between assets and risk factors may also be influenced by third causal factors, even if they are not on opposite poles of the same continuum (Patterson, et al, 2005).

Conversely, some factors act as support in times of stress and adversity and also cushion the individual from developing or exhibiting negative outcomes; these 'protective factors' are discussed in the next section (Rutter, 1990).

Masten's (2008) definition of protective factors includes any set of circumstances that mediate the effects of risk and facilitate adaptation. Howard and associates consider protective factors as "the internal assets of [an]

individual...[and] the external strengths occurring within systems in which the individual grows and develops" (Rutter, (1987).

There is a wide range of definitions and interpretations of the concept of teacher resilience; Patterson, Collins and Abbott (2004) define it as using the teacher energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adverse conditions. Denzin and Lincoln, (2000) offer a more comprehensive definition when they explain teacher resilience as the capacity to 'spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic and vocational competence despite exposure to severe stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today's world' (2003).

Masten, Best and Garmezy (2008) define teacher resilience in terms of adjustments to varied situations and increase in personal competence in the face of stress or adverse conditions.

Teaching is a unique profession in the sense that beginners or new teachers have responsibilities comparable to more experienced ones. New teachers have to adjust and adapt to their professional demands while carrying out full teaching loads and handling all administrative and extra- curricular duties, often in less pay than their co-workers. Researches show that often new teachers are allotted the unwanted and difficult subject combinations and more challenging students to manage, in addition to duties of supervision, extracurricular tasks, paper work, parent interviews, and preparing results and reports, etc. (Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Kosnik& Beck, 2005; McIntyre, 2003). They also face the fear of appearing incompetent or inept if they ask for guidance or help. The attrition rate among new teachers is therefore persistently higher than in teachers who have taught for more than 5 years; McIntyre (2003) reported that by the second year of teaching, nearly 18 % of teachers in Ontario, Canada, were at risk of leaving their profession. Multiple researches all over the world confirm similar or higher early teacher attrition rates (Tait, 2008).

The reason for teacher job attrition and turnover are manifold; McIntyre's (2003) research points to dissatisfaction with job or teaching assignments, frustration with the politics involved, lack of adequate resources and inadequate mentoring support as the major findings as reasons for teachers leaving their profession.

## **Statement of the Problem**

There is a huge void in the literature that can provide an in-depth understanding of the interplay of personal and contextual factors around early career teachers' experiences and how they build resilience resultantly. An investigation into the nature of resilience can afford a new lens through which to examine the complex issues of retention of beginning teachers and new teachers' learning, generating valuable information for policy-makers and educational stakeholders. This

knowledge and understanding may enable administrators to facilitate teachers and establish conditions and environments conducive to developing teacher resilience.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the factors that influence the development of teacher resilience at the tertiary level of education in Pakistan?
2. What conditions and contexts are more conducive to teacher resilience development?
3. What commonalities or differences exist in how resiliency is demonstrated by teachers at the tertiary level in Pakistani education?
4. What steps may be taken to facilitate and foster teacher resilience at the administrative and policy level?

## **Research Method and Procedures**

The study was qualitative. In phenomenological research the researcher aims to describe what all participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon, focusing on the universal essence, rather than individual aspects of it (Creswell, 2007). One of the core beliefs in phenomenological research is that it is 'philosophy without presuppositions', meaning that all judgment is suspended about the nature of reality and 'the natural attitude' until something can be backed up by more certain data (Creswell, 2007).

The population for this study consisted of tertiary education teachers, from public or private universities or degree-level institutions in urban Pakistan. Purposive sampling was done for this study, where five information rich cases were selected. All participants currently teach in institutions set in the urban regions, and all have taught for more than 2 years as tertiary education teachers.

Preliminary conversations were carried out with 25 tertiary teachers, from different institutions in urban areas of Pakistan, out of which only 5 were ultimately selected after their information and qualifications were screened. The participants were met individually to acquaint them with what the study was about and how they could contribute to it. The data collection tools were briefly discussed with them. In four subsequent meetings, the rest of the information was collected in one month. For this study, the participants will be referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The factors were examined thoroughly and after extended inspection, color codes were assigned to the factors that were related and were common across the

narratives of the participants. The categories were further condensed and merged to form broader themes that served as the main aspects of resilience as evident from the collected data. Six main categories, three sub-categories and two novel aspects were hence achieved, which are discussed in detail below. The categories are mentioned in the order of importance based on the instances and repeated mentions in the narratives of the participants.

### **Incidents of Successful Adaptations to Stress and Challenges**

he most recurring theme in the narrative of the participants is the role of past experiences of stress and adversity on the future handling of challenges. Participants who had dealt with stress in childhood, either in the form of personal disappointment or seeing significant others handling stress, were better equipped to strive and overcome the negative outcomes and function effectively in their professions. The level and duration of that stressful event or incident are not as important as the experience itself; the adverse events ranged from handling rejection from being selected in a sports team (P5), or seeing and sharing the trauma of business losses and relocation (P4), to even feeling disappointment in personal achievements due to constant comparisons with siblings (P1). In the case of P2, she never experienced stress and hardship before entering the profession, but seeing the senior teachers and her role models in situations of stress helped her learn by example and adopt their overt reactions. This later led to developing enough confidence and strength to feel resilient inwardly as well. In the profession itself, participants repeatedly mentioned the role of successfully handling tasks and performing despite the tension, which leads to future confidence and competence in demanding situations. This is especially evident in the narrative of P4 who mentions that her extreme challenge was to survive in a situation which robbed her of her professional sense of identity, but once having done that, she now thinks that she has become fearless and has renewed hope that she can handle any situation.

### **Mental Strength and Capabilities**

Another category that is of interest in the development of resilience in participants is the mental resources and strength that the participants displayed in the face of trauma and challenges. This is especially evident in the narratives of P3 and P4, who despite facing extreme mental hardship had recovered, and in the case of P3, who thrived even after the incident. P1 mentions that she was mentally strong even as a child and would envision herself in the shoes of her elders and continuously devised solutions to problems and stressful situations. P2 discovered her mental capability and inner strength when she was placed into challenging job-related situations; P5 also mentions his mental capabilities as the reason he was able to

surmount rejection and disappointment. In the case of P3, the stress was prolonged and did not just pose an external challenge, but cast doubts on the very essence of her being and her identity as a person; her every belief and personal conviction were negated and questioned. She was left on uncharted territory out of which the only escape was through her mental strength and adaptability. An interesting mechanism used in such a scenario is the reevaluation of current circumstances to pursue a new course of action and in the process forge a new identity that is congruent with the changing situations. This mechanism was evident in the narrative of P5 as well, when he took stock of his strengths and abilities and based on that chose teaching as a viable profession, after facing rejection and disappointment in his sports career.

### **Maturity and Personal Growth**

This is a rather simplistic aspect of resilience, but which was nevertheless common in all five narratives; the participants opined that their maturity was the main reason they were able to handle stress well. This may well be the only factor contributing to resilience which all the participants unanimously agreed upon. What the participants meant by personal maturity is varied in its explanations; P1 thinks maturity is the ability to place herself in another's situation and find solutions to different problems; P2 believes that she developed maturity after entering the profession and developed a sense of responsibility for her decisions and actions; P3 thinks being the eldest meant that she was always the rational one and the one who had to be a role model for others which made her mature before her time; P4 thinks his maturity is something intrinsic which his elders recognized even when he was a child and which made them give his opinions and voice importance; and P5 thinks the manners and behaviors instilled into him as child, how to respect and gain respect, were the reason he was a mature individual. Within the category of maturity, personal growth and adapting to changing circumstances, hold a significant place; the participants believe that if the individual is mature enough, s/he will make the necessary negotiations and adjustments which are required for their profession etc. This was especially displayed by the actions of P2 and P3, who made every change necessary to fit into a system they supported and respected. The other participants did not necessarily agree with the system, but made personal changes that they deemed were required in their profession.

### **Commitment to the Profession**

This is a recurrent theme in the narratives of successful teachers all over the world. The participants for this study shared this feature in their professional identities that they were committed to their chosen profession and all that went with it. P1 described the commitment as her sense of responsibility as a teacher, and the way

she kept records of the students' performances; P2 associated commitment with the thought that she had chosen teaching on her own and it was her responsibility to deal with the challenges and difficulties that came with it, which she was determined to do; P3 showed her commitment to the profession by assuming different roles and positions within her profession and not giving up despite threats to her sense of professional and personal identity; P3 said that his sincerity and association with the students and his affinity to the institution he worked in were the testament to his commitment; while P5 said that his one defining quality as a professional was his commitment to the job at hand and his consistency in producing efficient outcomes. The commitment professed or exhibited by the participants influenced the decision making processes in their daily tasks, and affected how they chose to respond to and face the challenges and stress that came with them. Their sense of commitment also contributed to the development of resilience and focusing on the long term goals and aims which they set for themselves, ignoring or bearing the relatively less important hardships they encountered along the way. In the discourse on identities, commitment to the profession and also to some extent the institution they worked for formed a distinctive part of the professional identities of the participants.

A subcategory also came to light which is an offshoot of professional commitment; the focus on increasing professional skills and repertoire. This is evident in the identity formation of the participants as well; all of them considered increasing their professional skills as an encouraging factor in cementing their identity as teachers. Also related to this is the interest in learning and increasing knowledge of the subject and discipline itself; this interest may be said to be developed due to the commitment to efficient teaching or vice versa. One P4 opines that teaching is the only profession where there is so much scope for learning and growth. He became a co-learner to his students when he realized the empowering aspect of knowledge; it is also one of the reasons he stays in the profession.

### **Authority and Leadership Roles**

An interesting common feature of the lived experiences of the participants is how at some point in their lives before becoming a teacher, they had successfully fulfilled the requirements of some position of authority or leadership. These incidents or experiences contributed to them developing a sense of power and influence in them that contributed to them assuming more positions where they had some dominant role to play. In the case of P1, that sense came from being a leader in her group and as she remembers, many acquaintances came up to her and tried to follow her lead in minor decisions too. P2 expresses her childhood experiences when she was the talkative one and was the one her sisters turned to if they wanted to convey some message to their parents and felt too shy to say it

themselves. P3 was the eldest and according to her the most mature one and from an early age she was treated as an adult and continued with this sense of authority even after marriage and her career as a teacher. P4 was the binding force in his group of cousins and friends and reminisces that even the elders of the family turned to him for advice and valued what he contributed to their decision making. While P5 was very expressive and knew his ability to influence others through the use of words; he later turned this ability to his profession and also developed a keen interest in molding the minds of his students and deliver knowledge. The theme of feeling a need to influence and mold the minds of the learners formed major aspects of the identities of the participants as well.

### **Personal Criteria for Performance and Success**

This is one of the most important aspects of the resilience of the research participants and successful teachers all over the world; the setting of personal standards of achievement and success which guide performance and choices in the profession, as well as in the many interpersonal dealings and relationships with colleagues and administration. One of the facets of this personal criteria is a certain indifference to the opinion of others in important matters and decision making. P1 displayed this when she said that the constant comparison with her sisters did not bother her, and she found ways to be satisfied with her achievements; she also set standards for personal performance independent of the requirements or rules set by her institution. P2 mentioned that she listened to the advice and opinions of others before making a decision but followed her instincts and judgment while making a final decision. While P5 explains that he has always set goals for himself which are independent of any external competition or criteria; this led him to perform better and push himself further even when there was no external pressure. P4 and P2's stories do not show major incidents which are related to personal criteria; but the choice of P2 to join online courses to improve her performance and knowledge, without any externally set need, and P4's decision to set his teaching style and content on the lines of an international university course, hint at these considerations forming a part of the inner workings of their minds when embarking on a course of action.

A subcategory that emerges from this is an aversion and intolerance to criticism and adapting behavior so incidents that lead to criticism in any form may be avoided. This aversion comes from an inner quality standard that defines how the individual should and will react and respond in certain situations, in addition to maintaining a high level of performance in teaching. When this inner standard is not met, or someone criticizes the individual, feelings of frustration and anger arise; some of these feelings are directed towards the instigator, the one who criticized (rightly or wrongly); while some reaction is directed to oneself, that there was some lack or failure that requires remedial action. In this perspective, the



aversion to being criticized may be seen as a manifestation of the personal criteria for performance which is in some way violated. Nevertheless, this is an arguable matter, and many would argue that an intolerance to criticism may also arise from an unwillingness to change one's behavior, or not entertaining more than one perspective or opinion about any given situation.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed at understanding and exploring the nature of resilience in tertiary teachers of Pakistan. The focus was on the lived experiences of the teachers and how they developed resilience through facing challenges and stress in their everyday jobs. The research is significant as it related to teaching which a very stressful and demanding job; and if there is no resilience in teachers, then according to research nearly 50% leave their jobs in the first 5 years. This study used the phenomenological approach in qualitative research, with a focus on using narrative life history approach, and semi-structured interviews as the main instruments of data collection. The study incorporated many features of teacher identity in the construction of the research instrument, as international researches have pointed to marked overlap and similarities in the mechanisms of resilience development and identity formation. Many factors were discovered which influence the development of resilience which relate to the personal, professional and interpersonal dimensions of identity as well.

Some of the major aspects of identity that play an important role in the development of resilience in the participants are commitment to work hard, interest in learning and teaching, respect and sincerity towards the learners, need to influence the minds of learners, leadership qualities and ability to be expressive and good at explanations.

Upon examining the participants of this study as a group and ethnographically representing their commonalities that contribute to the development of resilience, it was discovered that many personal, and professional aspects were similar, despite the participants being from different age groups, institutions and cities across Pakistan. The major areas where commonalties lie are the maturity and personal growth of the individual, the commitment to the profession, the role of mental strength and capabilities, leadership and authority positions, successful incidents of handling stress and challenges, setting personal standards for performance and success, the role of the expectations of significant other in decision making and the chance to create a new identity for oneself.

Many contexts and environments also played significant roles in contributing to the development of resilience in the individual including school environments in childhood, support from parents and significant people in life, successful mastery incidents as learners, effective teacher training, and supportive and friendly environment at the place of work. Based on these findings it may be

concluded that resilience in tertiary teachers of Pakistan is a common phenomenon, which enables the teachers to face the less than ideal and sometimes discouraging daily routines of their profession.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the data gained from the research participants, and the discussion and analysis of factors that contribute to the development of resilience, the following recommendations may prove useful for institutional administrations as well as teachers themselves, for improving the resiliency experiences of future teachers.

- Resilience begins in childhood; providing children with support and opportunities to develop resilience should be a focus for teachers, especially in developing countries like Pakistan.
- Leadership roles should be given to individuals in the guise of learning tasks, co-curricular activities and even in informal settings to facilitate and encourage them to take initiative in future challenges.
- Families should make every member feel important and give value to their opinions and personal voice. They also make room for negotiations and discussions to develop psychological capabilities in their members.
- Teacher training and education programs preparing students to make transitions to teachers can play a significant role in mediating the stress and pressure with the initial stages of the profession.
- Beginning teachers should be assigned to mentors, who discuss their needs and problems with them in a friendly atmosphere, where there is no fear of judgment.
- Staff rooms should not be treated as recreational areas only, but as constructive spaces where teachers can exchange and discuss views with other teachers and find solutions to common problems.

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