Resilient leaders, resilient schools
Christopher Day
Opinion piece
Resilient leaders, resilient schools
Christopher Day, Professor of Education, University of Nottingham

Leadership contexts

In this piece, I will suggest that resilience is an essential quality and a necessary capacity for leaders to lead at their best. This is so in part because of the innate complexities of leading and managing in schools; in part because of the influence that heads must exercise with a range of stakeholder groups and individuals in the process of school improvement efforts; and in part because such efforts take place in shifting and sometimes conflicting reform contexts which tend to increase and intensify leaders’ work and lives. It is a truism to state that headteachers in many countries over the last 20 or more years (and in the UK especially) have experienced an increase in multi-tasking and work longer and more unsocial hours in their attempts to deal with the expanding number of duties, roles and responsibilities, and accountabilities placed upon them. Such diverse and sometimes competing demands not only challenge the breadth of qualities, knowledge and skills possessed by leaders, but also test their adaptivity, flexibility and resilience.

A recent survey (Angle et al, 2007) showed that, in England, only 7 per cent of secondary heads perceived that they had any time to engage in interests outside their work; it is unlikely that much will have changed in the years since then, as more recent root-and-branch reforms in the governance and curricula of schools in England and Wales demonstrate. It is not surprising therefore, that becoming a head has become less attractive for many in recent years; and many schools, especially those that serve socio-economically disadvantaged communities, continue to find it difficult to attract candidates (NAHT, 2011).

Why a Focus on resilience is important

‘Resilience’ has its origins in child development research, where it is seen as a capacity to recover from adverse events. More recently, interest has grown in the capacity of adults to be resilient over a career, in different contexts and in times of change. Outside education, there is still a focus on resilience, which is defined as the ability to overcome extreme trauma or adversity, eg war, famine, and serious physical or psychological damage. The developing literature on resilience bears parallels with the stress management literature, but is wider in its concerns, eschewing (though not ignoring) deficit models of stress prevention and reduction for more forward-looking and positive approaches. Rather than asking: ‘How can we prevent stress and mental/emotional ill-health?’ the questions it raises are: ‘How can we foster resilience?’; ‘What type of training, support, work environment, culture and leadership and management practices will facilitate its development?’ The answers to these questions in a recent ESRC interdisciplinary seminar series (University of Nottingham, 2010) suggested that, like young children, teachers’ resilience lies in the contexts and the relationships in which they develop as professionals and not simply in their personal attributes.

Recent international research into the work and lives of school leaders who sustain success (Moos et al, 2011) also supports a broader definition, demonstrating that whilst the concept of resilience elaborated in the discipline of psychology helps clarify the personal characteristics of trait-resilient people, it seems not to have addressed in any substantive way how the capacity to be resilient in different sets of positive and negative circumstances, whether these be connected to personal or professional factors, can be enhanced or inhibited by the nature of the external and internal environments in which we work, the people with whom we work, the strength of our beliefs or aspirations and our moral/ethical purposes. Support for this more positive perspective can be found also in Fredrickson’s (2004) theory of positive emotions. She suggests that, ‘throughout experiences of positive emotions… people transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated and healthy (Fredrickson, 2004:1369); that, ‘the personal resources accrued during states of positive emotions are durable, [outlasting] the transient emotional states that led to their acquisition (Fredrickson, 2004:1372). In other words, they serve as resources which assist people in managing adversity.
Research into resilience as a contributor to novice teacher success, commitment and retention in North America also suggests a relationship ‘between resilience and... personal efficacy and emotional competence’ (Tait, 2008:57), and the author provides a useful summary table (Table 1).

Table 1: Indicators of resilience, personal efficacy, and emotional intelligence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resilience</th>
<th>Personal efficacy</th>
<th>Emotional intelligence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Able to show positive adaptation in the face of adversity</td>
<td>Sees tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats</td>
<td>Confronts failure with optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to rebound</td>
<td>Able to rebound</td>
<td>Able to handle stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Willing to try different methods</td>
<td>Adaptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to make &amp; maintain supportive relationships</td>
<td>Benefits from social persuasion &amp; support</td>
<td>Builds bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has problem-solving skills</td>
<td>Open to new ideas/methods</td>
<td>Negotiates solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to plan</td>
<td>Able to plan</td>
<td>Shares plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks help</td>
<td>Asks for help when needed</td>
<td>Seeks feedback &amp; support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to act independently</td>
<td>Self-monitoring/regulating</td>
<td>Self-regulating/motivating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has goals</td>
<td>Sets challenging goals</td>
<td>Sets goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>Persistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes risks</td>
<td>Takes risks</td>
<td>Demonstrates initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Predicts capability</td>
<td>Optimistic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tait, 2008:61
Everyday resilience

Whilst empirical and psychosocial research has revealed that capacities for resilience are not only bound up in or determined by individual histories, within education, also, there is an increasing recognition that the nature of teaching and learning and the contexts in which they takes place demand what we might call ‘everyday resilience’. Processes of teaching, learning and leading require those who are engaged in them to have a resolute everyday persistence and commitment, which is much more than the ability to bounce back in adverse circumstances. The capacity to be resilient is, therefore, an important factor in teaching and teacher effectiveness over time and can be developed. It is certainly not simply a personal trait. Rather, it is a construct that is relative, developmental and dynamic, a product of personal and professional dispositions and values which can be influenced by organisational and personal factors, determined by individuals’ capacities to manage context-specific factors and influenced by school leaders. The social environment is important, and resilience can be fostered or diminished through the environment (for example, leadership interventions in establishing and nurturing structures and cultures). Recent European research on the impact of psychosocial hazards on teachers at their workplace (ETUCE, 2011) found that ‘a higher job satisfaction is presumed to decrease the chances of stress’ (ETUCE, 2011:19) among teachers. Moreover, and perhaps not surprisingly, the same research found that the factors that had the strongest impact upon job satisfaction were ‘trust and fairness’ in the workplace, followed by ‘sense of community’, ‘meaning of work’, resources and ‘work privacy conflict’ (ie, the compatibilities or incompatibilities of working and private lives).

How resilient leadership can contribute to resilient teachers

School leadership, like classroom teaching, is a complex process and managing complexity is, in itself, inherently stressful. It is stressful because it involves influencing others in order that they might strive to improve and thrive in different ways; and improvement involves change. Successful school leaders know that there are associations between the quality of classroom teaching and the quality of student learning and achievement. They know, also, that classroom teachers work to influence a range of students who themselves may or may not wish to learn and may or may not wish to learn in the way their teachers wish them to learn. The efforts to influence student learning, which teachers who are teaching to their best must make daily, are considerable, and in order for them to grow and sustain their passion, expertise and success, they themselves will need support. Like students, they may be in different phases of their professional learning lives and demonstrate different levels of competence and commitment (Day et al, 2007).

If the capacity for resilience is indeed the outcome of a dynamic process of interaction within and between individual biographies and their past and present socio-cultural contexts, it follows that a key role of leaders is to foster the individual and collective capacity-building of resilience. For example, teachers may respond positively or negatively in the presence of challenging circumstances, and this will depend on the quality of organisational or colleague leadership as well as the strength of their own commitment. Extended collaborations, for example, need to be managed in order to avoid their potential for ‘collaborative inertia’ (Huxham & Vangen, 2005:13).

A range of recent empirical research confirms that there is no magic formula for achieving success. Thus, whilst I have no quarrels with the current (one could almost say relentless) policy focus upon so-called ‘instructional leadership’ or ‘leadership for learning’ (Hallinger, 2010), I would argue that this must always be accompanied by an equally strong focus provided by ‘transformational leadership’ theory (eg Leithwood et al,2006) upon the quality of the teaching and learning environment, whole-school vision, setting directions, redesigning organisational structures, and developing and sustaining the capacities of teachers to teach to their best through comprehensive and differentiated professional learning and development opportunities.

There is no space here for a detailed discussion of the strategies through which headteachers of successful schools achieve and sustain success (see Robinson et al, 2009; and Day et al, 2011 for research-informed reports on this). However, it may be useful to consider four qualities which are not always articulated in the plethora of leadership texts now available: academic optimism, trust, hope and moral purpose.
Academic optimism

Academic optimism in teachers has been defined as a teacher’s individual and collective beliefs ‘that they can teach effectively, their students can learn and parents will support them so that the teacher can press hard for learning’ (Beard et al, 2010). It includes, ‘cognitive, affective and behavioural components of optimism merging into a single integrated construct’ (Beard et al, 2010:1142) and is associated with relational and organisational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Seashore-Louis, 2007) nurtured, built and spread by successful headteachers. Whilst it follows that academic optimism is a necessary constituent for success for teachers, it is not unreasonable to argue that academic optimism is a characteristic that is common to all successful heads too. Indeed, Beard et al (2010) also associate academic optimism with ‘enabling’ school cultures, defined by Hoy and Miskel (2005) as hierarchies that help rather than hinder, and systems of rules and regulations that guide problem-solving rather than punish failure.

Trust

The Oxford English Dictionary defines trust as ‘confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing’. Trust is, then, associated also with, ‘the quality of being trustworthy, fidelity, reliability and loyalty’ (www.oecd.com). In other words, trust and trustworthiness are in a reciprocal relationship. It is claimed that ‘a presumption of trust rather than a presumption of mistrust helps individuals and organisations to flourish’ (Seldon, 2009:preface):

> As role models, leaders across society must meet two key criteria of trustworthiness; behave ethically and be technically proficient. The power of leaders to build or destroy trust is vast. Without honesty and competence, suspicion will grow.

*Seldon, 2009:26*

Trust is an individual, relational and organisational concept, and its presence and repeated enactment are as vital to successful school improvement as any expression of values, attributes and the decisions that heads may make. Research has suggested that ‘trust in leaders both determines organisational performance and is a product of organisational performance’ (Seashore-Louis, 2007:4).

Trust within organisations cannot, however, be unconditional:

> Discerning the proper level of trust requires wisdom and discernment on the part of the educational leader. Optimal trust is prudent, measured, and conditional.

*Tschannen-Moran, 2004:57*

Hope

Successful leadership is, by definition, a journey of hope based upon a set of ideals. Arguably, it is our ideals that sustain us through difficult times and changing personnel and professional environments. They are an essential part of resilience:

> Having hope means that one will not give in to overwhelming anxiety... Indeed, people who are hopeful evidence less depression than others as they manoeuvre through life in pursuit of their goals, are less anxious in general, and have fewer emotional distresses.

*Goleman, 1995:87*

The evidence from research is that resilient leaders who sustain success in student learning and achievement are always beacons of hope in their schools and communities.
Moral purpose

Resilience is an essential but insufficient indicator of leadership success. As a middle leader of a school in the East Midlands found recently in her research:

Absence of resilience at the most senior levels of leadership in schools can present itself as a deterioration in the general functioning of the school and can be evidenced in a variety of areas. These include loss of direction in terms of funding and budgeting; curriculum developments; teaching and learning strategies; control of discipline; staff pupil relationships and school community relationships.

Birkbeck, 2011:14

Whilst resilience is an essential attribute, in itself it is not enough. Poor leaders (and teachers) may be resilient. They may survive without changing, without improving. Resilience without moral purpose, without a willingness to be self-reflective and learn in order to change in order to continue to improve is not enough. Resilience, then, cannot be considered in isolation from these and other constructs of commitment, competence, agency, vocation, individual and collective academic optimism, trust and hope.

Coda

There is no doubt that the increasingly complex and diverse social, emotional and performance-oriented demands on schools have created pressures upon heads to be more overtly successful in demonstrating a greater range of value-added achievements among all their students and, in particular, those that relate to measurable outcomes and those that relate to wellbeing, social harmony and democracy (defined differently in different countries). This has caused their work to become more demanding internally and externally in working with an increasing number of diverse communities of interest. The combinations of demands are not all new but they are certainly more intensively driven through complex policy agendas. In order to meet and mediate these demands, heads need to work successfully in a number of arenas and some – those who work in schools in especially challenging communities – need to possess more, and in some cases additional, sets of qualities and skills than those who do not work in those contexts.

The ability of heads and teachers to sustain resilience throughout their careers will be influenced by the interaction between the strength of the vocation of the individual, those whom they meet as part of their daily work and the quality of the internal and external environments in which they work. Their capacities to manage unanticipated, as well as anticipated, events effectively will be mediated by these in times when organisational and professional change are inevitable in order to meet new social and economic challenges, it is those who are supported in managing connections between their educational values, beliefs and practices and those of their colleagues and organisations, through the exercise of individual, relation and organisational resilience, who are most likely to lead and successfully manage the everyday uncertainties of learning and teaching.
FAQs

Here are six frequently asked questions with answers:

Q1. Why is resilience important to teachers and headteachers?
A1. Teaching and leading to one’s best demands a store of positive physical, intellectual and emotional energy because such work is intensely interactive.

Q2. Do some people have the capacity to be more resilient than others?
A2. Yes, because people have different personal and professional histories, they will differ in their capacities to be resilient.

Q3. Does this mean that people’s capacities to be resilient are unable to be developed?
A3. No. We know from research that these are influenced by environment, by levels of commitment and by professional life phase.

Q4. Do school leaders need to be concerned about their own capacity for resilience?
A4. Yes they do, because they are responsible, above all, for establishing the expectations, aspirations and practices of all those in the school. They need to model academic optimism, hope, trust and moral purpose at all times and in all circumstances – and this requires resilience.

Q5. Do school leaders need to be concerned about others’ capacity for resilience?
A5. Yes. Research shows that most school leadership effects on student wellbeing and achievement are indirect. Successful leaders work with and through others. To do so successfully requires that they know their staff well so that they can build their capacities for resilience in ways that are appropriate to each individual and the needs of students.

Q6. Can you test for resilience?
A6. Recently, government has recommended the introduction of so-called personality tests for student teachers. One of these is a 15-minute questionnaire which focuses upon emotional resilience. Whilst this is a welcome acknowledgement of the importance of resilience in teachers (and leaders), it can only assess resilience in an abstract way and in the present. It cannot predict people’s capacities for resilience in the changing circumstances that will apply over a career. This is why creating the conditions for high levels of motivation and job satisfaction and actively building teachers’ capacities to be resilient in school are key leadership tasks.
References


Bryk, A S & Schneider, B, 2002, Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement, New York, Russell Sage Foundation


ETUCE, 2011, Teachers’ work-related stress: Assessing, comparing and evaluating the impact of psychosocial hazards on teachers at their workplace, Brussels, European Trade Union Committee for Education


Goleman, D, 1995, Emotional intelligence, New York, Bantam


NAHT, 2011, Annual report of the state of the labour market for senior staff in schools in England and Wales, London, National Association of Headteachers

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children’s centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

An executive agency of the Department for Education

We care about the environment
We are always looking for ways to minimise our environmental impact. We only print where necessary, which is why you will find most of our materials online. When we do print we use environmentally friendly paper.