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Michelle C. Hughes Dr.

Westmont College, mhughes@westmont.edu

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Can Resilience Be Our Teacher Super-power?

Michelle Hughes

Abstract

Teaching is courageous work. Today's teachers face heavy workloads and growing emotional responsibilities as K-12 students and families face complicated hurdles and issues such as mental health issues, immigration, and natural disasters. This essay names resilience, grit, and perseverance as essential dispositions needed to tackle the daily hurdles and unexpected circumstances found in the classroom and pre-service teacher preparation. The author's reflections lead to practical recommendations with the intention to nurture and cultivate resilience in teachers and school communities.

As I complete my 30th year of teaching, I wholeheartedly believe that grit, perseverance, and resilience are essential dispositions needed to not only equip pre-service teachers but to sustain them in long-term professional careers. Teaching is complex and complicated (Korthagen, Kim, & Greene, 2013; Palmer, 1998; Van Marter Souers & Hall, 2019; Wormeli, 2015). Teaching is emotional. Teaching requires investment on multiple levels (Fallona & Caniff, 2013; Hill-Jackson, Hartlep & Stafford, 2019). Teaching involves the heart, mind, and soul. Teaching is courageous work.

Teachers juggle a myriad of student personalities and needs. They focus on students' social-emotional health, ever-changing standards and technology, curricular trends, differentiation, and large class sizes. Their workloads and emotional responsibilities continue to grow as K-12 students and families face complicated hurdles and issues related to disabilities, immigration, mental health, wellness, trauma, and homelessness.

Today's teachers must dig deep within when they commit to teaching in order to elevate the profession and also maintain and sustain a professional career. Teachers must develop a toolbox of dispositions; in addition to lesson plans, back to school nights, pedagogy, and bulletin boards, they need a collection of intangible softer skills (Hill-Jackson et al., 2019). Teachers need to intentionally foster and cultivate dispositions like grit, resilience, and courage to tackle the scope of their professional responsibilities. Teachers must be able to solve problems, search for resources, and bounce back when the going gets tough.

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Encountering the Unexpected

I serve as a faculty member in a pre-service program at a small Christian college. In 2017-18 my colleagues and I experienced an unusually hectic year full of unpredictable circumstances. The year felt heavier than usual at the outset; its weight seemed to increase with a host of

Michelle Hughes is an Associate Professor of Education at Westmont College located in Santa Barbara, California. She can be reached at mhughes@westmont.edu with questions or comments about this essay.

CAN RESILIENCE BE OUR TEACHER SUPER-POWER?

unexpected disruptions to the academic calendar. The year also held uncharted territory for me personally with two teenagers at home; I realized right away that I needed to preserve some emotional energy each day to support and guide my oldest child as she navigated her senior year in high school, her college applications, and the decision-making process.

Early in the fall semester, I felt a heaviness that lasted into December 2017 when the Thomas Fire swept through my local community. Extreme smoke, unhealthy ash-filled air, and intense evacuations disrupted the small college campus where I work. My children at home experienced their own school closures as my college campus evacuated, faculty modified final exams, and the college community completed the semester's work remotely. Everyone in the larger Santa Barbara community was affected with an evacuation order, offered to host evacuees, or thoughtfully served friends in need. The Thomas Fire's destruction stunned and stung our community as we entered the holiday season.

Once the smoke cleared in early January 2018, the community made efforts to reset and find a sense of normalcy. Then, unexpectedly on January 9, heavy rains soaked the county as mud literally buried our beloved community in a matter of minutes. The Thomas Fire had stopped burning in late December, but its impact and desecration of foliage in our foothills became ripe terrain for heavy rains, debris flow, and the devastating Montecito Mudslides. Once again, the community experienced uncertainty as friends and neighbors lost their lives, homes, and businesses. Utter devastation permeated the community's livelihood and core. In the months following, sporadic rains fueled additional disruptions with school closures and evacuations, power outages, and water quality issues. Just as one evacuation order lifted, another order arrived amplifying the community's pain and efforts to literally stay afloat. It became an increasing challenge to digest the breadth of emotions, hurt, and loss felt across the city.

There are far greater and more significant stories of deep hurt and personal loss to highlight, yet I share my imperfect perspective, as an educator and advisor to liberal studies majors and pre-

service teachers, hoping to underscore the physical and emotional impact that each disruption had on the normal routine at my workplace, in local neighborhoods, and schools. Experiencing interruptions to my own teaching and routine reminded me of the significant need to instill and develop powerful dispositions such as grit, perseverance, and resilience in pre-service teachers.

Pondering Resilience

Each year when I visit K-12 classrooms and supervise student teachers, I soak in the enormity and scope of responsibility each teacher faces. Smartphones, I-pads, social media, anxiety, safety, bullying, learning disabilities, lockdown drills, and a shaky political climate and narrative all contribute and exacerbate the breadth of knowledge and skills new teachers must now possess. Palmer (1998) named that teachers have moments of exuberance and joy in the classroom juxtaposed with moments of pain and perplexity. Using Palmer and the recent natural disasters in my community as a springboard, I decided to ponder the idea that if K-12 teachers can foster, develop, and model dispositions like resilience and grit, the impact may also shape and equip K-12 students with hope and courage for their own lives, especially when life's unpredictable pendulum swings their way.

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Duckworth (2016) described grit as essential to goal setting and loving what you do. She names grit as a major predictor of success. Duckworth identified resilience, intentionality, passion, and purpose as qualities, when combined, cultivate grit. The author suggested that a teacher needs to

demonstrate assets such as grit, perseverance, and integrity; she recommends using a tool like her own Grit-Scale to help teachers and students identify work habits related to survival and growth rather than giving up when the going gets tough. Duckworth (2018) named characteristics or assets, like grit, as strengths of the heart; she even raised her own children with a “Hard Thing Rule” which translated to choosing to do and stick with one hard thing or activity. Hayward (2015) extended this approach suggesting that teachers should foster grit in students so they become self-aware, willing to tell their own stories, and able to create a culture for risk-taking.

Similarly, Aguilar (2018) framed resilience around how individuals weather the storms of life and bounce back from them (p. 2). Aguilar suggests that building resilience can serve to energize and fuel an individual’s courage. I was presented firsthand with a similar approach when my husband and I attended our daughter’s college orientation last summer. The university’s staff skillfully coached parents through a workshop focused on building resilience in college students. Presenters encouraged parents to come alongside their first-year college students to help them develop skills for decision-making and identify failures as part of growth, ultimately leading each student to understanding his or her purpose (Boise State University, 2018). The message inspired parents to name their child’s strengths and assets whenever challenges appeared. This encouragement added to my earlier inquiries around resilience and prompted me to ponder how my husband and I might demonstrate our own resilience as first-time college parents.

Curiously, I discovered a link between resilience and the image of a buoy or buoyancy. Buoyancy elicits an image of a buoy floating and bobbing up and down in the ocean. An ocean buoy is constructed to stay afloat even if it is pushed or pulled down in the sea; it is designed to rise to the surface again and again. The notion of buoyancy indicates lightness mingled with an ability to bounce back; building and fostering resilience requires strength, flexibility, and buoyancy. Soon after the aforementioned Santa Barbara disasters, the Director of Counseling Services at my college shared that resilience can be viewed as a journey full of joy, pain, and setbacks (Nelson, 2018). He

skillfully encouraged my college community to avoid avoiding, to face, name and address the unexpected difficulties that the recent disasters caused in our community. These recommendations felt difficult to execute, yet faculty and staff were urged to approach the unexpected and its aftermath with intentionality and buoyancy to foster and grow resilience.

As I pondered the unexpected I experienced firsthand, I contemplated how teachers can remain buoyant, stay afloat, and thrive through the unexpected? I wondered how I can, as a teacher of teachers, prepare pre-service teachers to foster, model, and cultivate resilience when there is deep strain, tension, and anxiety? How can pre-service faculty like me, K-12 school communities, and principals equip teachers with strength and courage? How can we arm educators with qualities like grit and resilience so they can bounce back from the unexpected? Aguilar frames a possible answer to these questions: resilient people often engage in difficult work over many years (Aguilar, 2018, p. 211). This idea stuck with me; Aguilar affirmed that educators must put in the time, commit to building personal and professional resilience, press on, and do the hard work. Aguilar’s “Resilience Manifesto” found in her recent book, *Onward*, lists ten principles to guide an individual’s or group’s collective commitment to resilience. Specifically, Aguilar’s principle ten describes cultivating resilience with the intention of becoming stronger so to help others become stronger.

In the last year, I’ve been able to connect with exceptional educators that have demonstrated powerful and heroic examples of resilience. One such educator was forced to commute to her school on backroads for five hours a day due to the blocked and muddy roads post Montecito Mudslides. In order to restore routine and normalcy for students, another local school had to move their classrooms to temporary campuses for several weeks after the natural disasters; the school’s teachers showed up and demonstrated resilience far past their job descriptions. A principal I ran across was forced to muster and maintain professional strength to support her teachers after a student died in one of the natural disasters.

CAN RESILIENCE BE OUR TEACHER SUPER-POWER?

Beyond catastrophic events like these, there are typical schools and predictable school days. I visit schools weekly and see teachers listening to students, encouraging them, sharing struggles alongside them, and checking in with them. Teachers extend personal strength to students every day. They come alongside students struggling with loss and sometimes death, a failed exam, a threat to safety, or a bad dating relationship. Teachers, whether placed in extreme or mainstream circumstances, exhibit profound courage and grit firsthand when they make the choice to show up for students day after day. Teachers choose to respond with intention, care, and compassion. They put students first in the midst of predictable daily routines and remarkable challenges.

Recommendations

Pondering resilience has uncovered several practical recommendations for teachers; hence, I offer three practical recommendations for fostering resilience with the hope that each strategy provides a starting point for teachers to cultivate and practice grit, resilience, and courage in the classroom.

First, I recommend that teachers cultivate resilience by carving out time for reflection. Teachers need time and space to take a walk, write in a journal, sit quietly and breathe. Teachers must prioritize time to ponder and reflect on experiences when they have felt resilient or were forced to develop a resilient spirit. Ironically, the time I invested writing this essay has helped me reflect and identify my own stories and experiences of personal and professional resilience. I discovered that I needed to intentionally reserve time in my daily calendar to make space for reflection. Additionally, in pre-service programs like mine, faculty regularly require students to reflect in writing and in discussion groups. Yet, once a teacher is in her first teaching position in her own classroom and without this structure, she must seek and schedule time and space to reflect. Creating space in faculty meetings for teachers to reflect and ponder professional questions, both big and small, can also build teacher awareness and resilience. Teachers need opportunities to name when they

have had to dig deep to persevere, get through a tough time, bounce back, grow and thrive. I recommend using The Onward Workbook as a practical guide for building and strengthening teacher reflection and resilience (Aguilar, 2018).

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A second recommendation to foster teacher resilience is to share stories of resilience with colleagues and students. Hoerr (2013) encouraged educators to model and possess an attitude of grit. The author suggested that when teachers reflect and share personal grit experiences, they help prepare students for the real world. When this happens, a teacher's courage becomes contagious. Furthermore, teachers can present courage and grit as a focus of discussion with colleagues and students. Principals can prompt teachers to share stories of courage and grit to empower others to persevere and stay the course. Souers and Hall's (2019) research affirmed a similar recommendation that promotes teacher self-awareness and self-care to establish a nest or culture of safety for students. The authors suggested that teachers should know themselves and acknowledge past experiences and sources of influence in order to support students in intentional, specific and proactive ways. Recognizing our own teacher resilience and courage can be a powerful example to students and colleagues.

A final recommendation to foster resilience includes naming specific skills and qualities of grit and resilience that teachers see in students. Acknowledging student assets can expose and strengthen students' skills and responses that lead to resilience. Teachers can choose to foster a learning environment where student struggle is welcome and encouraged, especially when

learning a new concept or topic. Creating a culture of error (Lemov, 2015), where mistakes are framed as opportunities and student errors are part of the learning process, can generate greater student confidence and grit. Hoerr (2013) suggested presenting explicit situations to students where they must problem solve; teachers can ask students to identify grit, courage, and moral strength when they problem solve. Educational psychologist Borba (2018) validated this approach and suggested that when an individual demonstrates moral courage it increases a person's confidence and builds resilience. Borba deemed practicing courage as a teachable skill and habit that develops an individual's problem-solving abilities.

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Conclusion

In closing, I hope teachers will recognize the impact of fostering resilience in themselves and their students. Although dispositions like resilience, courage, and grit are not easily seen or measured, educators can intentionally seek to foster and practice these dispositions. A principal recently shared with me that teachers need character, integrity and heart skills to thrive in the profession. I anticipate that teachers will grow their resilience when they share personal stories and create a classroom culture where dispositions are valued. I pray, that with intention, teachers will highlight dispositions such as grit and resilience to build their professional self-awareness and in turn will develop student awareness to pay it forward.

A recent graduate from my pre-service program provided a beautiful illustration of resilience when she sent the following email (Chambers, 2017):

Today we got news that a student was killed in a car accident. This loss comes as a shock and with

great sadness to me and the school. Heartbroken and unsure of how to carry out today, my mind goes back to my time with you. More than anything each of you taught me how to love, care, and provide for my students in the non-academic ways. To be mindful of the whole child and what they carry in their backpacks. Today, all our backpacks are full, heavy, and seemingly unbearable, but I am able to talk to my sixth graders about gratitude and about going home and hugging their parents tonight. I am impressed with the conversations that have come from this experience and I am encouraged by how well the students are handling it and supporting each other.

This heartfelt example and teacher response displays resilience and intentionality; her experience validates the authenticity of the unexpected found in K-12 classrooms as well as the significant need to foster resilience in our teachers and students.

Resilience: Our Teacher Super-power?

Recognizing the complexities of teaching, the vulnerability of students, and the potential in our students, teachers can and should consider what fuels their commitment, passion, and courageous spirit in and for the classroom. I wholeheartedly suggest that all teachers make resilience our teacher super-power!

Fostering teacher resilience can bring long-term reward and benefit to our professional lives, our students' lives, and most importantly can nurture greater hope for the future.

Fred Rogers (2018), famous for his long running children's television show, once stated, "What is essential in life is invisible to the eye." As teachers face complexities and uncertainty in and out of the classroom, they must commit and seek to develop greater professional resilience and courage. Scripture affirms, "And we boast in the hope of the

CAN RESILIENCE BE OUR TEACHER SUPER-POWER?

glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:2-4, NIV). Fostering teacher resilience can bring long-term reward and benefit to our professional lives, our students' lives, and most importantly can nurture greater hope for the future. I invite you to join me on this hope-filled journey.

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