

# Teacher Resilience and Learners' Classroom Disciplinary Problems in a South African Setting

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This paper explores the nature of learners' classroom behavioural challenges from a resilient teachers' perspective. Plethora of literature points on the negative responses of teachers towards learners' classroom behavioural challenges, such as the use of corporal punishment, the use of sarcastic language to mention but a few. Least is reported on teachers who strive above these learners' classroom behavioural challenges manifestations. Thus, in this paper, a different approach is employed to explore the nature of teachers who are resilient in the face of the challenges that learners present in the classrooms. A pathogenic or a causal approach which looks at the cause of the misbehaviour of the learners is discarded. In order to achieve this endeavour a qualitative phenomenological research approach was employed. Nine secondary schools teachers were purposively sampled for the study, 5 females and 4 males; age range was 32, with mean teaching experience of 17 years. An in-depth interview strategy using open-ended questions was used to illicit responses from the participants on their resilience strengths. Data collected was decoded and thematically analysed. The findings of the study reveal that resilient teachers concentrate on the well-being of the learners rather than the behaviour problems.

**Key words:** *learners, classroom, behavioral challenges, teachers, resilience*

## Introduction

Scholarship on learner classroom behaviour challenges is well documented. Learner classroom behaviour challenges are identified by anecdotes of lack of discipline, which means not learning to behave in an acceptable ways as instructed by the teacher or the school rules (Mthanti & Mncube, 2014, Mestry & Khumalo, 2012, Maphosa, 2011, Rossouw, 2003). Problems with learner classroom discipline continues unabated. This, in return, affects the



manner in which teachers manage learner classroom behaviours. Teachers respond in many different ways to learners' classroom discipline, some others respond positively, but in many cases, teachers respond negatively (Wolhuter & Russo, 2013, Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013, Marais & Meier, 2010). Teachers have reported despondency, burn-out, stress and other forms of illnesses as a result of the challenges they come across in their classrooms in relation to learner behavioural problems (Motseke, 2013, Schulze & Steyn, 2007, Steyn & Kamper, 2006). In most of the reported cases on learner behavioural challenges teachers respond with the use of corporal punishment, albeit unlawful (Moyo, Khewu & Bayaga, 2014, Maphosa & Shumba, 2010, Morrell, 2001).

Teachers continue to be faced with learner classroom behavioural challenges (Mohapi, 2014). This is a normal encounter as the learners in the classroom are heterogeneous. Learners bring with them in the classrooms different baggage that the teachers have to manage, for example, different socio-cultural background and emotional uncertainties to mention but a few. It is how teachers respond to these challenges that will set the classroom tone and ambiance. More so, teachers are held accountable for their actions in relation to their management of the classrooms (Agolli & Rada, 2015). Likewise, teachers are expected to report to the school authorities and to some extent to the parents of the learners in their classes on their academic, social and emotional development (Moyo, Khewu & Bayaga 2014). Thus, teachers are poised to apply different approaches in order to comprehend how their learners behave. The choices selected tends to be the lenses through which teachers view their classroom challenges as either being positive or negative.

Despite learner classroom challenges that teachers are faced, it is the contention of this study that there are teachers who remain steadfast and are resilient while other teachers withers away. Teachers who are resilient use their internal resources in order to adapt or applying flexibility to challenging situations. Resilience as a coping strategy has been applied in different settings, such as street children, orphans as well as in the workplaces (Malindi, 2014, Malindi & Cekiso, 2014, Cooper, Flint-Taylor & Pearn 2013, Theron & Malindi, 2010, Johnson & Lazarus, 2008). By developing teachers' resilience learners' classroom behaviour challenges could be addressed positively. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how resilient teachers respond positively to learner's behaviour challenges in the classroom.

## **Literature review**

### **Classroom behaviour problems and teachers' resilience**

Learner classrooms are contested spaces for both teachers and learners in many settings. For instance, Boylan, 2010, Graig, 2009, McGregor, 2004, show that learner classroom could be for control, the teacher teaches to maintain a favourable learning conditions. Conversely, learners take chances by disrupting the process of learning, thus, assuming control of the classroom, which are disruptive and could lead to the collapse of the classroom orderliness

(Mullai, 2011). The intermediate path is where the teacher and the learners work collaboratively to achieve the aims of education with little frictions. Stojiljkovic, (2011), Abu-Tineh, Khasawneh & Khalaileh, (2011) allude that teachers who establish sound collaborations with their learners are likely to be less stressed as opposed with teachers who assume authoritative and *laissez faire* attitude. Both authoritative and *laissez faire* classrooms incline to experience moderate to severe learners' classroom behaviour challenges, which associated with negative classroom environment (Milonovic, 2015, Uibu & Kikas, 2014, Burkett, 2011). Singham, (2005), succinctly states that authoritarian classroom is an indication of the breakdown of trust between the teacher and the learners. Contrarily, Laforteza, 2009 refers to "safe speaking" in the Oriental classroom to illustrate collaborative classrooms as being characterized by shared vision, authority and knowledge. These elements, shared vision, authority and knowledge are the capital resources that teachers could use to mediate in the classroom. How teachers break or manage breakthroughs amid morbid learners' classroom contestations could be embedded in the innate strengths of individual teachers. Differently posited, teachers' stress and burn-out linked with learners' classroom behaviour challenges could be expressed as the pathological aspects whereas teachers' resilience as the positive resources within the immediate use of teachers.

### **Development of teachers' resilience fostering harmonious classrooms**

Resilience as a domain of discipline has acquired multiple definitions through the process of time. However, there seems to be agreement that resilience refers to the process of coping with disruptive, stressful or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with protection mechanism and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event (Hoge, Eloise, Austin & Pollack, 2007 and Rausch, Lovett & Walker, 2003). At value face, resilience implies the ability of the person or an organization to speedily recover from problems and to react to potential crises with elasticity, pliability and buoyancy (Hay & Weyers, 2009). Differently put, resilience has been defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and significant sources of stress (Tait, 2008). For example, Malindi and Theron, (2010) in their study looked at resources street children employ to be resilient despite of lack of resources such clinics, hospitals or schools, street children relied on humour, ingenuity and tenacity to cope. These definitions of resilience are relevant in the context of this study as teachers with the ability to pre-empt potential threats related to learners' classroom behaviour challenges are able to intervene in the teaching and learning process. This assertion is supported by Hong, (2012) by maintaining that teachers who are resilient tend to respond positively in the stressful classroom or school environment by demonstrating effective strategies for working with challenging learners by deriving deeper satisfaction in their work. Like many other concepts in the social sciences, its discourse has been whether it is a trait (nature) or something that is learned during the process of challenges (nurture) (Belsky & Pluess, 2009, Rutter, 2006). The nature debate seems rebuffed as scholars tend to embrace the notion of resilience as set of behaviours.



For example, many teachers struggle to apply alternative measures to corporal punishment after it has been abolished (Wagner & Ruch, 2015, Masitsa, 2011, Maphosa & Shumba, 2010). The implication is that teachers who are unable to employ these alternatives are stressed and unable to cope with learner disciplinary challenges. The symptomatic perspective focusing on learners' classroom challenges is problematic and limiting as it does not provide an alternative view of teachers who are resourceful and resilient. The studies done on the characteristics of resilience focus on the characteristics or attributes of resilient individuals as being embedded on social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future. Thus, in the context of this research study teacher resilience refers to how teachers are able to adapt to stressful teaching conditions that are associated with township schools in South Africa. Lack of learner discipline, overcrowded classrooms, less resourced schools, lack of safety are, but, some of the factors that could add to the personal stress that teachers already have to their personal ones.

Can teachers' resilience be developed or is it by chance? Literature on the development of teacher resilience demonstrate that teacher resilience does not happen by chance, but, by conscious awareness of use of available resources within and outside (Hong, 2012, Hay, & Weyers, 2009, Tait, 2008, Bokek, 2002). In addition, Theron (2016), Mampane and Bouwer, (2011) suggest that teachers, globally, continue to play a pivotal role in enhancing their learners' resilience capacities by among others, paying attention to:

- Developing warm, respectful connections, including between teachers and learners,
- Communicating and enabling achievable, consistent expectations for respectful

Classroom interaction and student success or competence,

- Engaging and developing students as active, capable agents and facilitating Mastery, and
- Investing in effective teaching, safe learning environments, and resilience-supporting

Classroom practices, and/or helping students to master classroom-based tasks

Following is an outline of the research paradigm that informed the study.

### **Research design**

An exploratory qualitative research method was used for this study (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Furthermore, Payne & Payne, (2004) define an exploratory qualitative research method as a qualitative research that sort to dwell on the nature of the problem rather than to generalize. In this instance, the study sought to explore the subjective experiences of



resilient teachers in secondary schools despite the high levels of learner classroom behaviour problems.

### **Participants and setting**

Participants in this study were teachers in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Province. A purposive sampling was employed using a criterion sampling strategy, which is participants' teachers who are resilient in their management of learners' behaviour challenges (Given, 2008, Latham, 2007). Nine secondary schools teachers were purposively sampled for the study (5 females and 4 males; age range was 32, with mean teaching experience of 17 years. All teachers had Bachelor of Education degrees at fourth year and above and were accessible. The teachers' teaching experiences, age suggest that teacher participants have been exposed to a number of learners' classroom behaviour challenges for some time. Participants' education background further enlighten of their basic pedagogical knowledge of working with learners.

### **Data collection**

An in-depth one-on-one interview of nine teachers from neighbouring secondary schools was conducted on perceived contextual influences on teacher resiliency based on learners' classroom behaviour challenges in one of the secondary schools in Lejweleputswa previously disadvantaged township schools (Lasky, 2005). Teacher professional identity, resourcefulness, adaption, sense of purpose, professional development and personal faith as resources were explored were explored through one-on-one in-depth interview interviews.

### **Ethical commitment**

The researcher committed to ethical stance that views qualitative interview as a construction site of knowledge as a moral inquiry (Kvale, (2010), Gray, (2010) and Horrocks, (2010) Permission to conduct the study was sought and allowed by the concerned provincial Department of Education. Adherences to their departmental assertions were acceded to. Participants were made aware of their right to participate in the research, the aim and objectives of the study were elaborated upon, and confidentiality and their anonymous participation were assured that they could withdraw from participating when they felt the need to so (Wellington, 2015).

### **Trustworthiness**

Peer member check was used to establish whether the data transcribed reflects what was postulated by the research question and aim of the study to establish data trustworthiness of the research study (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, (2016). Moreover, the researcher attempted to provide a detail description of the voices of the participants in the analysis of data (Gunawan, 2015).



## Data analysis

Data was first transcribed from the interviews recorded, followed by the researcher familiarizing with the data. Having generated initial themes, data was analysed by coding information in different codes from that data emerging from the interviews as suggested by Braun & Clarke, 2006. That was to capture some meanings from teachers about learners' classroom behaviour challenges in relation to their resilience in the classroom. The validity of the themes was cross-checked against literature control referencing related studies such as Naicker, 2014, Hong, 2012, Maphosa and Mammen, 2011, Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011, Cukurova, 2009 on teacher' management of learner discipline in the classroom and teacher resilience. The thematic cross checking against literature review is to establish patterns, similarities and possible conflicts that may be embedded in the research study (Thurmond, 2001).

## Findings and discussion

The findings that are discussed in this section centred around four main themes which emerged from data analysis, which are: 1) commitment to the professional ethos; 2) sense of purpose; 3) emotional balance; and 4) religion. The key words that are used with verbatim quotes: (FP, MP denote, female participant and male participant respectively). These findings are considered next.

### Theme 1: Commitment to the professional ethos

Teachers act *in loco parentis* most of the time; they are parents when they are left in the care of the learners. In addition, teachers have a professional commitment towards their teaching profession. These commitments were apparent during the interviews, teachers with a sense of responsibility towards the learners they teach and the professional body they practice under demonstrate commitment as an asset of resilience (Jacobs & Richardson, 2016, Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, Stanford, 2001). These teachers use commitment as a resource to overcome learner classroom behaviour challenges that are viewed as a problematic by some other teachers. # FM.4 mentioned the following;

*"I find it easy to manage ill-discipline in my class when I treat learners with respect and acknowledge their presence as individuals" For, example, I try to learn most of their names and I call them by names often, this I think, teaches them to respect me in return"*

*"Understanding one's role to your learners is key, it makes you stay focussed to your work"* # FM.1

#MP.5 remarked; *"I stay focussed on what the needs of my learners could be, and I try to help, so don't get drowned too easily"*.



The above-mentioned excerpts support the views of Bobek, (2002) that fostering productive relationship with learners by showing them compassion, understanding, love and respect add as an internal resource that make teachers resilient towards learners classroom behaviour challenges that could be posed by their learners. #MP.8 added;

*“Having your work organized and ready for your class help to minimize the possible conflicts that one could have with your learners”.*

Teachers being aware of their passion for the teaching profession seem to be committed to their learners and their work.

## **Theme 2: Sense of purpose**

Teachers who see themselves as agents of change are said to exhibit high levels of self-efficacy to engage learners positively in a troubled classroom environment. Sense of self-efficacy is related to resilience in that it is a positive asset or resource that enables teachers to have personal self believe in how they manage their classroom. #FM.3 mentioned;

*“I see it as my duty to manage to manage problematic classroom encounters with my learners. I don’t view it as a problem but a challenge that must be managed positively. I also don’t see problematic learners as little monsters but as individuals who are looking for affection and recognition”*

# MP.2 had this to say:

*“I tend to leave my learners with a message at the end of my lesson to reflect upon, something that they have learned for the day. I see this as a preventative measure, as I remind them about this messages when they are faced with problems, this is able to open their eyes to realities of life”*

From the above excerpts, it shows that teachers with a sense of purpose have a deep self-reflection of their purpose as individuals as well as professionals to change the lives of others. The above-mentioned finding shows similar findings by Day & Gu, 2009, Gu & Smithem, 2009, Gu & Day, (2007) where they reported that teachers with a sense of purpose and coherence enjoy teaching their learners despite negative intonations towards the teaching profession. A deep sense of purpose is about finding who you are and what matters as a purpose for your existence in the world. Similarly, teachers with a sense of purpose tend to structure their classrooms in such a way that they also leave something of hope to the learners they teach.



### **Theme 3: Emotional balance**

Participants made reference to the state to state of emotions as a strength that enhances their flexibility to be positive and optimistic about their work. # MP.7 mentioned;

*“I am really interested in the learners that I teach, and I become very happy when they succeed in their studies and life. This satisfaction gives me an assurance that I have helped someone to find direction in their lives”*

The above comment indicate that teachers who demonstrate emotional balance are adaptable to changing situations and are happy about their roles they play in the lives of their learners. This statement is consistent with Mansfield, Beltman, Price and McConney, (2012) s’ observations when they state emotional balance assist in building support of trust and reflexivity in teachers. Mansfield, *et al* (2012) s’ views are in line with of notion of classroom cooperative classroom management which advocates shared vision, authority and knowledge.

### **Theme 4: Religion and cultural assets**

The right to practice of one’s religion and culture is a constitutional right in South Africa. The irony of that is that teachers are not supposed to deliberately express their harboured beliefs in front of their learners. This could be likened to religious and cultural indoctrination despite that evidence showing that the majority of South Africans are religious and cultural practioners. Despite these depravations, many teachers continues to encourage learners to uphold religious and cultural principles that purport character building and personal integrity.

#FM.6 added:

*“I am a Christian, I always preach the principles of goodwill in my class, so I do not give up on the learners I teach. I see unruly behaviour of learners as a challenge that I need to accept and as a parent address”. I enjoy the challenges that comes with my teaching as they make me stronger as a Christian”*

The remarks in the above excerpt affirms the importance of religion as an important social capital that one could into in times of difficulty. Kaasa, (2013), Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2009) show that shared values such as a religion are important to bind the community, such as the classroom of learners together. The salience of resilience as a component of social capital depicts a different view the plethora of challenges and the tendency of researchers to concentrate on the classroom behavioural challenges and difficulties that teachers encounter and are frequently depicted as vulnerable individuals and at times emotionally distressed.



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## Conclusion

This study explored teachers who resilience in relation to the challenges that are posed by learners' classroom behaviour challenges. Against the backdrop of teachers' burn-out and frustrations in dealing with learners' classroom behaviour challenges, it seems that the salience development of teachers' resilience is of great need. A number of learners' classroom behaviour challenges confront teachers which if not attended to could pose dangers of failing young learners in schools. In this study, components of teacher resilience such as commitment to professional ethos, sense of hope, emotional balance and religion were found to be present in teachers who are resilient towards emotional balance of their classrooms. Made aware of their innate strengths, this study informs that teachers' resilience is possible in mediating learners' classroom behaviour challenges. Similarly, empirical findings from the literature review suggest similar findings in this study that teachers' resilience is an important aspect teachers' longevity in the teaching profession. A need for research on the development of teachers' resilience is needed; is the development of teachers' resilience and individual effort or a school effort, what should be the role of school principals in fostering environments to foster resilience in teachers, and how can the support of parents harness resilience in teachers for the good of their children? It is hoped that once teachers' resilience is enhanced, teachers will be able to handle learners' classroom behaviour challenges positively.



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