

A journey in resilience: A trainee teacher's experience of teacher training

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Abstract

This paper describes my journey to becoming a teacher and building resilience in different training contexts. I consider the literature on resilience and in particular teacher resilience as well as the literature on organisational contexts with particular reference to the unconscious functions at play in organisational contexts. I explain my methodology which draws on an amalgam of Social constructionism, Social realism and Self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (S-STTEP). My analysis shows that whilst context and support are crucial for the development of teacher resilience, the structure of and unconscious functions at play in teacher training contexts are capable of stymying the development of teacher resilience as well as perpetuating a form of othering where trainee teachers are treated as subordinate in adverse training contexts.

Introduction

The autobiographical context of this paper

According to Kuhlmann and Bourgeault (2008: 5), “professional work is one of societies’ most contested areas of equality”. I know this from personal experience having trained for the legal profession in Nigeria and the United Kingdom. Although a longstanding profession in England, the legal profession only saw its first woman called to the Bar in 1922 which meant that for many years, there were only ‘gentlemen at the Bar’. In like vein when training for the legal profession in Nigeria, it was often my experience to hear frequent references of women lawyers as ‘gentlemen in skirts’

perpetuating the old fiction that there are still 'no women at the Bar' or no women in the legal profession. As female law students, it was not unusual to be told by male lecturers, that the term 'gentlemen in skirts' was a commendation of women who prevailed in spite of the arduous nature of legal training. Whilst I accept that training for any profession can be rigorous, hegemonic discourses in educational systems merely preserve the status quo of existing power relations by masking conflict thus succeeding in 'the maintenance of the prevailing social order without force' (Paetcher, 1998: 3) who has argued that. Thus, when othering occurs as a result of hegemonic discourses, the result is that those who are already subordinated are further excluded.

Being no stranger to rigorous professional training nor to being othered, I took the decision to retrain for the teaching profession because of concerns I had over the subordination of 'others' in education and how language, for instance, plays a role in perpetuating hegemonic discourses and subordination so that in comparison to the dominant group the 'other' is treated as 'the deviant and subsidiary case' (Paetcher, 1998: 6). Little could I have imagined that my experience as a 'trainee teacher' would open up to me what appeared to be another type of 'othering' in teacher training. Often the focus of the 'most contested areas of professional work', which happen to be in health care and academia, centres on women as a 'target group of exclusionary strategies and hegemonic claims embedded in professionalism' or on race, class and sexuality in the professions that tend to exclude all those labelled 'others' (Kuhlmann and Bourgeault, 2008: 6). However, there are also several voices in education, with some positioned as more powerful than others (Paetcher, 1998: 80). My teacher training experience has caused me to reflect on the conflict that power relations can mask in teacher training but once again I am empowered, as I was with previous

professional training, to be unafraid to give 'voice' to power issues and even to vulnerability. Surely, this can only influence my practice going forward to be one that promotes social inclusion in the classroom and with professional colleagues. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore questions as to how teacher training can perpetuate the 'othering' of trainee teachers through hegemonic discourses and school culture and how resilience is formed in trainee teachers (the author being the case study).

Literature Review

Resilience has emerged as a field of research of its own (Beltman et al., 2011) and the considerable body of research undertaken in this area points to the fact that although there are differences in how it is defined across disciplines, 'there are also shared core considerations across the disciplines which suggest that resilience presupposes the presence of threat to the status quo and is thus a positive response to conditions of significant adversity' (Gu, 2018: 16). In particular, the literature relating to teacher resilience has evolved from focusing on personal traits to considering the factors which influence the resilience process thus pointing to an understanding of resilience as a multidimensional and socially constructed concept and not only as a psychological construct (Flores, 2018; Gu and Day, 2007).

Mansfield et al (2012, in Flores, 2018: 169) further help to narrow the field of research on resilience by identifying the following key themes of resilience: 'it involves a dynamic process, it is associated with the interaction between person and context, and it is related to the ways in which individuals respond to challenging or adverse

situations'. Risk factors such as 'heavy workload, classroom management, feelings of unpreparedness, lack of support, lack of resources, etc' have equally been identified when teaching in adverse contexts (Flores, 2018: 169). Thus, resilience as it relates to teachers is not only an outcome but is also a process involving the 'interactions between early career teachers and the social, cultural, political and relational contexts of their new profession' (Pearce and Morrison, 2011: 48 in Flores, 2018: 169). The conclusion therefore is that **context** and **support** play important roles in the development and demonstration of resilience (Gu and Day, 2007, Mansfield et al., 2012). Thus, in this paper I explore the development of my resilience (both as an outcome and a process) by looking at the contexts in which my teacher training has been situated.

As context plays an important role in the development of resilience, it is incumbent on me to also consider the literature on organisational contexts. In looking at organisational contexts, it is important to consider not only 'the directly observable structures and functions' of organisations but also the unconscious functions in operation in organisations for both are said to affect 'the efficiency and degree of stress experienced by staff' (Mosse in Obholzer et al, 1994: 1). According to Obholzer et al. (1994: 1), 'social and psychoanalytical perspectives must be deployed *together* if real change is to be effected in those aspects where structure and unconscious function overlap'. This is because whereas 'social science aims to relate observable social structures to their functions in the external world', 'the so-described inanimate institution is also made up of living people who have unconscious and non-rational aims and needs which they must serve simultaneously with the rational aims of the organisation' and for these unconscious aims and needs we need the theoretical tools

and framework of psychoanalysis (Obholzer et al.,1994: 6). To be clear though, 'psychoanalysis and education are different projects' and 'psychoanalysis cannot provide a prophylactic for education although it can provide tools and metaphors for thinking about education' (Bibby, 2011: 5).

Stokes (in Obholzer et al.,1994: 121) posits that 'in order to understand many apparently personal experiences of stress, it is important to place these in their organizational context of uncertainty about the future, and a related confusion about the organization's primary purpose or mission'. Stokes' (in Obholzer et al.,1994: 121) argument is based on the idea of an 'organisation in the mind' and 'refers to the idea of the institution that each individual member carries in his or her mind'. Stokes (ibid) contends that members from different parts of the same organisation may have different pictures, often unconscious, of the organisation and these may be in contradiction to one another. These unconscious pictures in turn 'inform and influence the behaviour and feelings of members'. The result of this is that on the one hand an organisation may have a publicly stated purpose or mission and on the other hand there are the 'hidden conceptions' (Stokes in Obholzer et al.,1994: 121). Or "put simply, there is the level of 'what we say we do' but there are also the levels of 'what we really believe we are doing' and also 'what is actually going on'" (Stokes in Obholzer et al.,1994: 121). Stokes (ibid) says that members in an organisation may be unconscious of this third level (i.e. 'what is actually going on').

Stokes (in Obholzer et al.,1994: 125) also posits that because existing authority structures in organisations are continuously being challenged, this creates additional stress and confusion for the members of these organisations as they attempt to cope

with these changes. It is this change from 'conventional model of hierarchical top-down organizations' to organisations with 'negotiations between sub-systems' that has given rise to the bullying and scapegoating of certain individuals who are subjected to unbearable levels of pressure and are often driven out (Stokes in Obholzer et al., 1994: 125).

Methodology

In seeking answers to the questions of how teacher training may perpetuate the 'othering' of trainee teachers through hegemonic discourses and school culture and how resilience is formed in trainee teachers, I consider it appropriate to study myself because 'the instrument with which one explores unconscious processes is oneself-one's own experience of and feelings about the shared situation' (Obholzer et al., 1994: 6). As earlier stated, if real change is to occur in organisational contexts (and in this instance, teacher training contexts), then social and psychoanalytical perspectives must work in tandem in those aspects where 'structure and unconscious function overlap' (Obholzer et al., 1994: 1). In view of this, I will be relying on what can best be described as 'new methodological amalgams' (Gergen and Gergen, 2012: 6). In this case, by drawing on Social constructionism, Social realism and Self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (S-STTEP), social and psychoanalytical perspectives of the 'structure and unconscious function' of teacher training contexts are brought under consideration (Obholzer et al., 1994: 1).

Social constructionism concerns itself with relationships and it is this fact that lends this methodological approach to 'particular innovations in qualitative methodology' such as that which I am attempting here (Gergen and Gergen, 2012: 7). Strong social constructivism as a methodological approach is one that views all the attributes of human beings as constructed by the 'discourses, institutional mores and traditions of the society of which the individual is a member' and as such would indicate that knowledge of those institutions and how they work is also socially mediated and relative to the society of which they are a part (Scott and Morrison, 2006: 223). Moderate social constructivists would claim that these discourses, power networks and social arrangements do not have natural legitimacy, but are inventions of groups of people in society and these groups of people are stratified so that those who have greater control of resources in society are in a better position to determine future arrangements for social life (Scott and Morrison, 2006: 223).

Social realism however seeks to overcome the 'epistemological dilemma' that there is only a choice between positivist absolutism or constructivist relativism by overcoming the false dichotomy of 'either/or' and replacing it with 'both/and' (Alexander, 1995 in Moore et al, 2009: 2). Thus, 'social realist approaches aim to see through appearances to the real structures that lie behind them but acknowledge that these structures are more than the play of social power and vested interests' (Moore et al, 2009: 5). In other words, social realism supersedes social constructionism by recognising that 'knowledge involves more than social power; it also involves epistemic knowledge' (Young, 2008; Moore et al, 2009: 5). This has led to social realism being described

with terms such as 'ontological realism and 'epistemological relativism' (Archer et al, 1998 in Moore et al, 2009: 4).

When it comes to teacher education and teacher practice, an issue that has often arisen is whether practitioners can understand their experiences in ways that count as knowledge, or are only researchers outside of the experience competent to identify what contributes to the knowledge base (Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2009: 1)? On this issue of knowledge and practice, Putnam (2004, in Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2009: 5) posits that how knowledge and relationships are developed in practice are equally of value. Self-study methodology therefore emerged as a way to provide answers to questions about teacher practice and the ownership of knowledge which hitherto had been within the purview of traditional forms of research.

Therefore researchers doing research on personal knowledge of practice have rejected the notion that research should meet 'positivistic validity claims' choosing instead to turn 'their action to development strategies for making claims from a basis of the authority of experience rather than the authority of reason' (Munby and Russell, 1994 in Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2009: 49). In order to test the validity of self-study methodology, attention to ontology rather than only epistemology is therefore important. Finally, S-STTEP is situated 'in the midst of context, content, and process' all of which are relevant to the development of resilience (Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2009: ix, Gu and Day, 2007, Mansfield et al., 2012, Pearce and Morrison, 2011: 48 in Flores, 2018: 169).

Rejecting false dichotomies and 'either/or' stances in research allows one to seek stances and viewpoints that find common ground where possible; that which we agree about as opposed to that which we disagree about. Therefore, I reject the false dichotomy that insists that I analyse either the epistemological properties of the knowledge that is produced in my teacher training context or the power relations among actors in my teacher training contexts, choosing rather to consider both for I 'recognize that ontology (the study of what is real) implies epistemology (the study of how we know what is real, and epistemology implies ontology' (Moore et al, 2009: 5; Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2009: 7).

Critical Analysis

According to Roberts (in Obholzer et al.,1994: 110), 'the choices we make regarding which profession to train for, which client group we will work with, and in what kind of setting are all profoundly influenced by our need to come to terms with unresolved issues from our past'. In fact, we are told that 'many of the conscious choices made by helping professionals are based on idealism' (Roberts in Obholzer et al.,1994: 110). So, had my past experiences as 'other' led me to choose to train first as a lawyer and now as a teacher in order to help 'others'? Having lived in Kent for several years and witnessed what, as an expatriate, I could only describe as 'a poverty of aspiration' in some children from white working-class backgrounds, I began volunteering at my children's primary school helping to support classroom teachers by reading to young children whose parents did not (or could not?) read to them at home. When one young boy in a Year 4 class told me that he wanted to be a 'wheeler dealer' when he grew up, my idealistic concern resulted in me making the conscious choice to retrain as a

teacher. It would appear that Roberts (in Obholzer et al.,1994: 110) was correct in arguing that unresolved issues from our past and idealism really do account for our choice of profession. After all, the idea that ‘slipshod parenting’ and ‘low aspiration’ among white working-class families has been disputed by public policy experts who argue that it is not about “white working-class culture’ alone but specific pockets of failure” in society (The Week, 2014:13).

However, my quixotic quest to do good led me to choose a challenging context in Kent to train as a teacher: I chose the Medway area in Kent even though I lived over an hour away from the area. I equally chose a route to train as a teacher which I knew would be immensely challenging: The School Direct route. I rationalised to myself that training on the job from classroom professionals was immensely valuable. I recall saying at my interview for a teacher training place that I wanted to work at ‘grassroots level’ and in ‘the trenches’ with classroom professionals. I believe my metaphors point to the fact that I knew teacher training would indeed be rigorous, however I was confident that each training context would offer me professional support. In hindsight, I now wonder if I was not being idealistically confident about my expectations of receiving support from each training context given that when I first considered retraining as a teacher, not a single teacher that I knew encouraged me to do so. They all discouraged me from training as a teacher, and in fact some stated they were leaving the profession. Given the high proportion of teachers leaving the profession in the first years, it is no wonder that considerable attention is now being paid to teacher resilience (Le Cornu, 2009: 17).

At the teacher training induction convened by the training alliance I had applied to, I was presented with the training schedule below for an unsalaried trainee:

September to October:

0% Solo teaching

20% Collaborative teaching

60% Observations

20% Professional activities

November to December:

20% Solo teaching

30% Collaborative teaching

20% Observations

30% Professional activities

January to February:

50% Solo teaching

20% Collaborative teaching

10% Observations

20% Professional activities

etc.

The 'structure' of teacher training is intended to support trainees to develop in their practice and their resilience by providing the right balance of observations of experienced teachers, professional development and opportunities for teaching practice over the course of the training year. In reality though, I was teaching solo lessons at my first training placement from the start of training in September 2018 and by November 2018 I returned from a half-term break to be informed on the first day back that my teaching timetable had been increased to 50 percent (at least 2 months ahead of the timetable outlined above). In the 4 months that I was at this first placement, I was only formally observed on 4 occasions - twice by the subject mentor and twice by the professional mentor. The rest of the time I was the only 'teacher' in the classroom. In essence, what this meant was that as a **trainee teacher**, I was being made to do the job of a **qualified teacher** when I should have been receiving training on how to become a good teacher.

Opportunities to observe others were few and far between at this placement and time scheduled for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) was taken up by ad hoc tasks assigned to me such as being asked to leave cover work for days when I would be at the University or to cover lessons for other teachers who were absent (on one occasion, I covered a class of 32 Year 11 pupils - two classes merged into one). When I voiced my concerns to the school mentors, rather than viewing my concerns as a cry for help, it seemed to be viewed as a personal slight. Things would come to a head when the University Tutor visited the placement to observe me teach a lesson, a visit that the school mentors were aware of and had even referenced in the weekly bulletin

sent out to all trainees at the school. As was the case in all of my other lessons prior to this visit, again I was the only 'teacher' in the classroom. The only difference, on this particular day, was that there was someone present from the University to witness the state of affairs at this placement.

The structure of teacher training with its network of training partnerships, Universities, school placement actors etc is one that I accept as it is a 'recognition that intellectual and educational practices necessarily involve hierarchies, that hierarchies are not always and everywhere social and arbitrary, and that expertise is not antithetical to democracy and social justice' (Moore et al, 2009: 8). What the structure of teacher training also shows is that it is 'more than the play of social power and vested interests' (Moore et al, 2009: 5). However, between September 2018 and December 2018, I would wake at 3 am each morning with knots in my stomach and palpable fear over what the day at the school held for me and what treatment I would receive from professionals whom I expected nothing less than professionalism from. As I recounted to my university tutor, on some days it seemed like I was working with 'unprofessional professionals' for I had no other words to describe what it felt like to be screamed at by a mentor in full view of pupils and other staff, nor to describe the many negative incidents I experienced all of which left me reconsidering my decision to retrain as a teacher. To me it seemed like the 'negotiations between sub-systems' in the placement school had indeed 'given rise to the bullying and scapegoating of certain individuals' in this case trainee teachers 'who are subjected to unbearable levels of pressure and are often driven out' (Stokes in Obholzer et al., 1994: 125). For how else could I explain the claims that had been made in order to make me a scapegoat; claims

that I had never been asked to leave cover work or cover lessons or that I was unreceptive to feedback even though numerous email correspondence and the school's own information management system (SIMS) told an entirely different story. Not to mention the strange occasion where following the persistent failure of some Year 12 pupils to meet coursework deadlines, instead of supporting me with strategies for dealing with this so that those pupils could make progress, a senior leader presented me with a statement from the pupils and asked me to respond to the claim that 'Miss nags us to hand in coursework'. I still recall showing this leader, the tracker for the coursework as evidence of their persistent failure to hand in work, to which her unbridled response was that she had taken them at their word 'because they were prefects' without realising that there might be another set of facts. At no point did she acknowledge that in essence she had been complicit in undermining the 'trainee teacher' before pupils. All of these experiences and others served to treat me, the trainee teacher as 'the deviant and subsidiary case' (Paetcher, 1998: 6). This particular training school context was proof that there is indeed one level of 'what we say we do' but there are also levels of 'what we really believe we are doing' and also 'what is actually going on' (Stokes in Obholzer et al., 1994: 121).

In spite of this, I am grateful for key actors within the teacher training 'hierarchies' (in particular from the University and the training partnership) who appreciated the stresses and anxieties I was under, and who in spite of my resolve to see my training through in such adverse conditions took the decision to move me to another placement. By their actions they bore out what the research confirms which is that teacher resilience is not only 'the capacity to successfully overcome personal

vulnerability and environmental stressors', more importantly it is about the factors that influence the resilience process and how they should be managed (Flores, 2018; Gu and Day, 2007). In other words, whilst I would probably have overcome the adverse conditions under which I was training, if the process left me unwilling to continue in the teaching profession or ineffective as a teacher due to the lack of support when dealing with pupils, then the process of building resilience would have been stymied. Lest we forget, resilience is not only important for early career teachers, it is also important for building teacher effectiveness (Flores, 2018: 167).

If indeed **context** and **support** play important roles in the development and demonstration of resilience, then without doubt whilst this particular school context left me traumatised by the daily onslaught of castigations I received and the anxieties I developed as a result, in my new training context I would find the support and the training that had been lacking at my first training context (Gu and Day, 2007, Mansfield et al., 2012). At this new school, I was given numerous opportunities to observe others teach, I was supported to take part in professional activities, and regular observations of my teaching as well as mentor meetings took place on a regular basis. When I 'struggled' with a particular Year 9 class with multiple needs, my mentors reassured me that classes like this would make me a better teacher and gave me strategies for allowing this class and others to make progress. When some of my Year 12 pupils failed to meet deadlines that I had set for their coursework, I was supported to take steps in line with school policy by withdrawing their 'private study' hours on their timetable thus demonstrating that 'behaviour management is a team sport. It needs a team discipline, ethos and look' (Dix, 2017: 10.) This training context and the actors in

it demonstrated to me through their support that 'to get the behaviour you want there can be no gaps between the adults on what matters. It is this consistency that is most important' (ibid). In this context, I was never treated as 'the deviant and subsidiary case' (Paetcher, 1998: 6). In fact, when certain pupils went 'above' me seeking to undermine my authority in the classroom, they were always referred back to me, the teacher in the classroom. As my mentor liked to say, 'it is your classroom'. Support like this and other examples served to build my confidence and professional competence as a teacher.

Conclusion

This paper brought the 'structure and unconscious function' of teacher training contexts under consideration (Obholzer et al.,1994: 1). The structure of teacher training is not arbitrary, in fact it exists to provide the support and expertise that is required to prepare teachers for the teaching profession. However, the unconscious functions at play in teacher training contexts are 'social and arbitrary' and can prove 'antithetical to democracy and social justice' because organisations are made up of people who have unconscious and non-rational aims and needs which must be served along with the rational aims of the organisation (Moore et al, 2009: 8; Obholzer et al.,1994: 6). Based on my teacher training experience in two different contexts, I can surmise that if the 'organisation in the mind' of those in a teacher training context aligns with the purpose of the training context then not only will the training process be supportive but also teacher resilience will be the outcome. Put differently, if on one level, 'what we say we do' in teacher training contexts is poles apart from 'what is actually going on' in those contexts, then as my experience in my first training context revealed, the result is that the risk factors of teaching in adverse contexts (heavy

workload, classroom management, feelings of unpreparedness, lack of support, lack of resources, etc) are triggered with personal and professional consequences for trainee teachers (Flores, 2018: 169). And where adverse contexts exist in teacher training structures, then these can perpetuate the 'othering' of trainee teachers in an age when we should be doing all we can to resolve the teacher recruitment and retention crises.

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