
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/6750

Copyright © 2012 Taylor & Francis
It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.
Considering ‘teacher resilience’ from critical discourse and labour process theory perspectives.

Dr A. Price¹, Dr C. Mansfield and Dr A. McConney.

School of Education, Murdoch University, Australia

a.price@murdoch.edu.au

(Received ….; final version received ….)

This article considers the construct of ‘teacher resilience’ from critical discourse and labour process perspectives in order to cast new light on what has been traditionally viewed from a psychological perspective. In this respect the construct of resilience is placed in the broad political landscape of teachers’ work and the labour process of teaching, within a neo liberal globalised economic paradigm. Importantly, this article argues that any conceptualisations of teacher resilience should be critically appraised and not simply ‘taken for granted’. While the concept of developing ‘teacher resilience’ as a means, for example, of addressing alarmingly high rates of early career teacher attrition, may sound like a good idea, it is important to consider the way such constructs can be used to shape and potentially control teacher identity and the nature of teachers’ work.

Keywords: resilience; teacher education; labour process theory; teachers’ work; critical discourse theory

Introduction

“The first year nearly killed me”. This was one response from an early career teacher (ECT) to a recent survey regarding teacher resilience. Long hours, disruptive students, excessive paper work and increasing casualisation are often cited as contributing to teacher stress and burn out, leading to what are alarmingly high rates of early career

¹ a.price@murdoch.edu.au
teacher attrition in many countries. Whilst the extent of the attrition problem varies from
country to country, between 25 and 40% of teachers have been reported to leave the
profession within their first five years in the job (DEST 2003; OECD 2005; Australian
House of Representatives 2007). In the Australian context, a series of national reports
have been commissioned to shed light on the problem. The Australian Federal
Government’s Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) concluded in
2003 that:

The transition from graduate to beginning teacher is a time of considerable
challenge and vulnerability ….The first years of employment are often a very
isolating experience and a time of considerable stress and burn out. Many
valuable members of the teaching profession resign and substantial teacher
preparation courses are wasted (DEST 2003, 150).

Such reports highlight the need to investigate reasons for high attrition rates of ECTs and
develop coordinated workforce planning strategies to increase retention. The ‘Top of the
Class’ report (Australian House of Representatives 2007, 117), for example,
acknowledges in its executive summary that:

The high level of attrition is of concern, particularly in light of the investment
made in initial teacher education and the current and anticipated teacher
shortages.

One possible way to reduce high attrition rates is to develop ‘resilience’ among early
career teachers beginning in pre service teacher education programmes. Taking the
construct of resilience as it is commonly understood as ‘bouncing back despite adversity’
this would imply that pre service teacher education programmes could play a role in
developing the capacity of early career teachers to ‘bounce back’ despite the ‘adversity’
they are likely to face in their workplace. While this may seem like a good idea, it is our
contention that it is important to view such notions from critical perspectives. These
perspectives offer opportunities to ask questions about constructs like ‘teacher resilience’, ‘bounce back’ and ‘adversity’ and the characteristics that are said to underpin them. Importantly, they also serve to draw attention to what possible impact such constructs may have on the construction of teacher identity and the nature of teachers’ work.

This article has emerged out of robust conversations between members of a research team involved in a research project entitled Keeping Cool: embedding resilience in teacher education (2009). The project involved a review of the relevant international literature concerning ‘resilience’ and ‘teacher resilience’ as well as quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis regarding pre service and early career teachers’ understandings of ‘teacher resilience’. One of the aims of the project was to develop a framework for embedding principles of resilience in pre service teacher education programs.

The researchers come from diverse philosophical and academic backgrounds including psychology and critical theory. Our conversations challenged our initial understandings of the construct ‘teacher resilience’ and the impact such constructs may have on teacher identity and their work. They also encouraged us to take a cautious stance on the way in which we might frame such a construct in our work. We did not want our framework to become a checklist of resilience that could be used to characterise or construct a simplistic notion of a ‘resilient teacher’. In this article we present some background to the constructs ‘resilience’ and ‘teacher resilience’ from the literature. We then argue the case for using critical perspectives when considering such constructs. We examine the changing nature of teachers’ work in a neo liberal paradigm. Finally we suggest that
teachers and teacher educators should approach any such constructs as teacher resilience with a critical eye.

**‘Bouncing back despite adversity’ - conceptualisations of resilience.**

Initially the word ‘resilience’ was most commonly associated with the mechanical sciences where it has been used to describe the capacity of a body to “recoil, rebound, resume shape, after stretching or compression” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1976). The term has since been used in the fields such as psychology and the environmental sciences to describe the ability of human beings, or the environment, to return to equilibrium after exposure to adverse conditions. From this has come the commonly used phrase in relation to the concept of resilience – to ‘bounce back’.

The construct of resilience emerged in the fields of psychology and psychiatry in the 1970s through efforts to understand the seemingly successful development of children who were considered ‘at risk’ due to factors such as parental mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia), family conflict and poverty (Garmezy 1974) and potentially adverse experiences such as abuse, trauma and divorce. Early studies investigated the personal qualities of ‘resilient children’ and identified particular ‘risk factors’ that could lead to maladjustment or negative outcomes and ‘protective factors’ that had a moderating effect and could enable positive adjustment and outcomes (e.g., Werner 1993). In its simplest form then, resilience, within the psychological field, was generally conceived of as “successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, and Garmezy 1990, 426).
Critical and constructionist theorists, however, called for more explicit understandings of what ‘successful’ adaptation means and what ‘challenging’ and ‘threatening’ circumstances may be (Luther, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000). In doing so they questioned dominant discourses and understandings of resilience that had the potential to narrowly define notions of ‘successful adaptation’ and ‘challenging’ environments. These conceptualisations emphasised that resilience is socially constructed and manifests itself in different ways for different people in different circumstances. Critical theorist Ungar (2004, 352), for example, contends that a constructionist approach reflects a post-modern interpretation of the construct and defines resilience as:

The outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse.

Along side these more critical views, the concept of resilience has grown increasingly popular among neo liberal managerial projects. Self-styled ‘Resilience Expert’, Michael Licenblat B.Sc. (Psych), for example, is only one of many who host websites and professional workshops showing managers and employees “How to become resilient to pressure and bounce back fast from stress, tension and burnout in your business, work and life.” As he puts it:

In today's business world, CEO's, managers, professionals, staff and self employed business owners are under great stress to deliver more in less time with fewer resources. They face conflicting demands, long working hours, and constant change in an unforgiving business environment that keeps getting tougher, busier and faster.

Companies are finding it hard to hold onto valuable team members as staff are becoming stressed, over worked, and then quit. Business owners today are working harder and longer, and spend less time with their family. People are losing the passion for their work, have little work-life balance, and often find themselves in burn out.
So, what is the solution according to Licenblat? Attend workshops and learn how to “bounce back fast from the stress, tension and burn out in their work and life.”

http://www.bouncebackfast.com/

Such discourses reflect the way in which terms like ‘resilience’ and ‘bounce back’ in the neo liberal business world have become a means to enable overworked employees to cope with the pressures placed on them by globalisation and fast capitalism. Resilience experts like Licenblat claim to be able to help them overcome this problem by providing managers and employees with activities aimed to develop positive dispositions towards such pressures. It is important to note here that there are no attempts to change or resist the pressures (adversities) of the workplace in these discourses – workers simply learn to ‘bounce back’ from them.

Teachers ‘Bouncing Back’ – What does that mean?

Since the concept of resilience gained traction within the field of education in the 1990s, strategies to promote resilience in children have been widely used in schools (e.g.,


http://www.bounceback.com.au/node/1). To support the development of resilience, an array of programs, resources, websites and tool kits have been developed to assist teachers to implement programs aimed at developing resilience among their students. Resilience in these ‘texts’ has often been presented as sets of individual and contextual ‘protective’ factors that could be developed and ‘risk’ factors that could be avoided.
These would enable children to ‘bounce back’ in spite of any adversity they may face.

**Protective dispositions include:** positive values, courage and strategies for bouncing back, looking on the bright side, managing emotions, relationship skills, humour, dealing with bullying and being successful ([http://www.bounceback.com.au/node/1](http://www.bounceback.com.au/node/1)).

Texts on teacher resilience similarly provide an array of individual and contextual ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors. Among the individual protective characteristics identified most often are altruism, self-efficacy, confidence and coping strategies (for example Day 2008; Gu and Day 2007; Tait 2008, 59; Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy 2007, 954). Others include a strong sense of professional identity, agency, purpose and accomplishment (Howard and Johnson 2004; Sumsion 2004, 2007). Collegiality has also been identified by various researchers as fostering teacher resilience (Bobek 2002; Brunetti 2006; Day 2008; Day and Gu 2009; Jarzabkowski 2003). Support from administration, mentors, peers and colleagues were also identified as contributing factors to resilience (e.g., Anderson and Olsen 2006; Freedman and Appleman 2008; Olsen and Anderson 2007; Smith and Ingersoll 2004).

The teacher resilience literature highlights the way in which this emerging construct could be understood. Picture a resilient teacher narrowly based on these attributes and you would likely conjure up someone who has a strong sense of self efficacy, is highly motivated, has moral purpose, is flexible, has a sense of humour, possesses an array of productive coping strategies and can work collaboratively with others. The archetypal
resilient teacher is also supported by an effective administrative team and supportive peers. Armed with these protective factors it would seem that ‘resilient teachers’ can ‘bounce back’ from with the challenges presented to them by classrooms and schools in the 21st century.

Emerging then, from managerial discourses and the educational literature are sets of characteristics and conditions considered conducive to fostering ‘teacher resilience’. Most would appear to be admirable qualities to engender. We contend, though, that such seemingly harmless, and potentially helpful lists of personal dispositions and workplace conditions should be approached with some caution. We argue that such lists can be (mis)used to inform teacher education curriculum (including entrance and exit requirements) and can become enshrined in teacher professional standards. As such they become potentially powerful mechanisms of control over the construction of teacher identity and the nature of teachers’ work. It is at this point, before strategies, programs, toolkits and in particular professional standards are rolled out, that we would argue that it is important to inject a dose of critical theory into the conversation around teacher resilience.

**Constructing teacher identity around teacher resilience**

From a critical discourse perspective it is important to consider how ‘key words’ like ‘teacher resilience’ and the characteristics that are thought to be associated with them are constructed, by whom and to what effect (Apple 2006). Critical perspectives aim to develop a better understanding of the multiple meanings, “complicated histories” and
socio-political values that underpin such words (Apple 2006, 8). Gee (1999), for example, draws attention to the common images or storylines that are evoked by such ‘key words’. He uses the term ‘cultural models’ to refer to the “first thoughts or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is typical or normal” that often emerge from the use of ‘key words’ (Gee 1999, 59). Significantly, these first thoughts are not neutral but are developed through a complex, socially situated network of experiences and understandings and are often informed by hegemonic discourses that emerge through the media, research and public policy.

We argue that the ‘first thoughts’ we have about many of the ‘key words’ that abound in educational discourses have been shaped and constructed through various dominant discourses in particular the current dominant ‘rightist’ paradigms that are so influential in shaping education and the nature of teachers’ work. According to Apple (2006), ‘rightist’ agendas such as neo liberalism, neo conservatism, authoritarian populism and the ideologies of the professional and managerial new middle class, aim to alter our common sense understandings by altering the meaning of words that we use to understand the world and our place in it. Through ‘fast capitalist’ texts, like company vision statements, a set of new identities is evoked such as ‘empowered worker’, ‘lifelong learner’, ‘worker as partner’ and ‘boss as coach’ (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear 1996, 33). In the era of fast capitalism with its accelerated production, distributed systems, flexible work arrangements and reliance of information technologies, the structure of the workplace has changed and boundaries between work and home have become blurred. The construction of new worker identities to suit these times is an integral part of neo
liberal agendas, which have as their goal the “production of entrepreneurial citizenry” and a “particular type of self, appropriate for efficient work within a global market” (Peters and McDonough 2007, 61). Consciousness about the way in which words and texts have and continue to be used to construct worker identities is important in any consideration of the term ‘teacher resilience’.

To illustrate how teacher identities can be framed by dominant discourses, it is useful to look at the way in which the notion of the ‘good teacher’ and the ‘good student’ have been constructed in line with shifting dominant socio political paradigms (Connell 2009; Thompson 2010). Connell (2009), for example, has argued that the notion of a ‘good teacher’ has changed throughout Australian educational conversations in accordance with shifting paradigms in educational policy, which are in turn influenced by broader socio-political and economic discourses. Tracing conceptualisations of the ‘good teacher’ from the beginnings of Australian colonialist public school systems to the present, Connell has identified several competing discourses including that of the ‘technical professional’, ‘reflective practitioner’, ‘teacher scholar’ and most recently ‘competent teacher’.

What is most significant, in terms of developing understandings about ‘teacher resilience’, is the way in which the notion of ‘competent teacher’ has emerged within the context of a “market-oriented political and cultural order” (Connell 2009, 217). It is within this context that current constructions of teacher resilience are similarly emerging. Connell maintains that the ‘competent teacher’ model, within neo liberal managerial structures, has been defined by an array of ‘professional standards’ documents that list in
varying degrees of specificity what a ‘competent teacher’ should know, believe and be able to do. These standards are not benign in that they can be explicitly used to assess, evaluate, promote, demote, employ, pay and in a word ‘audit’ teachers and their work (Connell 2009, 219). Our contention here is that attributes and dispositions associated with ‘teacher resilience’ could also become embedded in such standards and so it is important that this construct be carefully considered.

Pre service teacher education is also affected, as the impact of such constructs flows back and influences, covertly and overtly, the nature of the teacher education curriculum. Pre service teacher educators with critical perspectives can play an active role in either accepting or resisting such pressures. Connell’s work draws attention to the way in which seemingly harmless and ‘taken for granted’ phrases such as that of the ‘good teacher’ are in fact loaded with political assumptions that have the potential to critically impact on teachers’ work and the directions and purposes of education as a whole. Such theorising is helpful when considering ‘teacher resilience’ as it provides an opportunity to critically reflect on the ways in which the construct might be used.

Critical discourse approaches aim to uncover what type of ‘self’ the word ‘teacher resilience’ triggers in people’s minds. And importantly, who decides what we ‘picture in our minds’ and to what effect? What could ‘resilience in teachers’ look, sound and act like? How might resilience be framed in professional standards? Are resilient teachers those who ‘bounce back’ despite the waves of administrative tasks that continue to pound them? Do they sit ‘enthusiastically’ through so called ‘collaborative’ team meetings that
are driven by ‘administrivia’ and increasingly reactive and technicist professional
development workshops (Hardy 2010, 72)? Do they seemingly ‘happily’ take on extra
large class sizes for the sake of their school; spend time out of class promoting the
school’s new image for a niche market; take on extra administrative roles and avoid
unions and strikes? Do ‘resilient teachers’, in other words, put up with the increasing
marketisation of schools and get on with their work for the sake of the school [company]?
Are they so flexible that they are prepared to accept increasing casualisation of the
teaching workforce?

Discourse theory, in this article, has been used as a way to conceptualise, articulate and
better understand the socio-cultural forces and power structures that underpin emerging
notions of ‘teacher resilience’ particularly with respect to the construction of teacher
identity. This is only half the story, though. Returning to the commonly held notion of
resilience as ‘bouncing back despite adversity’ it is also important to consider the context
of teachers’ work which is seemingly creating the need for teachers to develop the ability
to ‘bounce back’.

_Bouncing back despite adversity – What makes teachers’ work so adverse?_

Critical discourse theories have enabled us to develop understandings about the way that
constructs like ‘teacher resilience’ could be used to shape and control teacher identity,
especially when enshrined in narrowly defined lists of competencies. In this next section
we now wish to turn to the other side of the resilience equation – the notion of adversity.
In doing so as pre service teacher educators (and indeed as parents) we are troubled by the possibility that teachers’ work and teachers’ workplaces are so adverse that either teachers leave in great droves or that they need to learn resilience in order to ‘bounce back’ from the adversity. We contend that labour process theories provide a ‘useful lens’ to understand the forces shaping and controlling the nature of teacher’s work (Reid 2003, 359) and if they are creating ‘adversity’ then how these forces may be resisted.

Labour process theories (LPT) foreground the fact that “teachers are workers, teaching is work, and the school is a workplace” (Connell in Acker 1999, 19). They provide opportunities to consider ways in which current market driven, neo liberal approaches to schooling create conditions in which teachers’ work can be described as adverse. At the centre of labour process theory is the notion of control and more specifically the purposes and forms that control takes (Smyth et al. 2000, 21). The centrality of the notion of control derives from the idea that in order for Capitalist economic systems to function effectively and a profit to be made, some form of control must be exercised over workers in order to maximise their work effort and obtain the desired work behaviours (Reid 2003).

Braverman (1974), a leading proponent of LPT in the 1970s, argued that forms of control over workers had intensified in the 20th century as a result of Taylorist systems of scientific management which pushed the division of labour to the point where workers, particularly on assembly lines, became increasingly deskill ed and detached from the product they spent their lives working on. These systems had further increased the gap between the design and the carrying out of a job, which lead to greater fragmentation and
degradation of work (Braverman 1974, 114). Whilst focusing mainly on industrial workers, Braverman also argued that other work, including teachers’ work, would increasingly become degraded and intensified under the Taylorist management systems. The shift away from teacher and school based curriculum design towards nationally imposed curriculum and assessment, where teachers’ work can become increasingly routinised and deskillled, is a case in point (Down 2009; Easthope and Easthope 2000;).

Drawing on labour process theory perspectives we acknowledge that some form of State control over teachers and teachers’ work is fundamental to Capitalism. In order for profits to be made, costs of production must be kept down and one way to do this is to cut labour costs (Smyth et al. 2000). This can be done through deskillling teachers’ work and/or asking them to do more in less time and with less resources (Smyth et al. 2000). So while teachers’ work has always been controlled, the extent waxes and wanes with the tides of social, economic and political paradigms (Lawn and Ozga 1986).

We argue here that since the economic restructuring of the 1970s this control has become more intense. This is not to suggest that there was ever a ‘golden age’, before neo liberalism, when teachers’ work was easy, unproblematic and secure. Teachers’ work has always been highly complex and skilled and yet often lowly paid and undervalued. A poignant example is that of women teachers in the 20th century in Australia. Not only were they paid far less than their male counterparts right up until the 1970s, women teachers also had their careers stultified by the insidious ‘marriage bar’ legislation which prevented them from teaching once they were married. Those who chose a teaching
career instead of marriage suffered the stigma of ‘spinsterhood’ (Trotman 2008). Those who married were only ever able to undertake casual teaching positions in times of acute shortage. Many of these women, particularly in rural areas, were pioneers and role models in their schools and communities but were often viewed in public discourses only as potential farmers’ wives (Trotman 2008). Some things have improved.

However, whilst acknowledging a long history of poor conditions, low status and low pay, we argue in this article that education, in more recent times, has become increasingly geared to market driven neo liberal economic paradigms characterised by Post-Fordist management systems, increasing levels of casualisation and intensification of the labour process (Apple 1989; Ballet, Keltchtermans and Loughran 2006; Down 2009; C. Easthope and G. Easthope 2000; Hargreaves 2009; Smyth et al. 2000; Peters and McDonough 2007). Independent research conducted by Education International leading up to a 2009 UN Report, for example, emphasised that teachers’ working conditions around the world have deteriorated in recent years, mainly due to funding cutbacks and increasing workload pressures (Attard 2009). According to the report, increasingly unqualified teachers are employed on low salaries and sub standard conditions to address shortages and reduce expenditure. Of particular concern is the status of contract teachers’ employment. Increasing neo liberal trends and entrepreneurial style management within all sectors of the education system are likely to increase the preference for contract teachers who can be shifted from site to site and in and out of work as the system requires. Morrow and Torres (in Burbules and Torres 2000) see an increase in part time work and casualisation as a key feature of occupational restructuring within neo liberal
globalisation.

This is undoubtedly a sign of what Buchanan et al. (2009) call an unhealthy skills ecosystem and we would argue contributes to an adverse environment particularly for early career teachers who are the most vulnerable. As well as increasing casualisation, where ECTs in particular face the prospect of short term contracts, Post-Fordist management structures have, according to Smyth et al. (2000 100), lead to intensification of teachers’ work, shortage of uncommitted time, increasing management responsibilities, rigid spatial and temporal structures, escalating accountability and greater scrutiny. Apple (1986) has written extensively about the deskilling and intensification of teachers’ work where more is required in the same amount of time. Similarly studies conducted in the late 1990s by Hargeaves and colleagues, of changes to teachers’ work over the past few decades, found that with increasing moves towards national standardization of curriculum and testing teachers reported “sinking professional motivation and lost classroom creativity” (2010, 149).

Added to this, like other workers, teachers are entering an uncertain and highly volatile working environment, not only over the next few years, but possibly for their whole lives (Buchanan et al. 2009). No longer can workers expect the apparent security of permanent, relatively autonomous, self respecting work for 40 to 50 years that characterised an Australian national icon of the [sic] ‘Harvester Man’ (Buchanan et al. 2009). Such ‘transitional’ labour markets have drawn the attention of researchers in Europe for some time. Schmidt (1997, cited in Buchanan et al. 2009 11), for example,
noted that workers in contemporary times can expect a series of work and life transitions involving education, family formation, spells outside paid employment and retirement. Importantly these ‘transitions’ are not as smooth and simple as neo liberal rhetoric might lead us to believe. Often they are marked by low pay, unemployment and sub standard work (Buchanan et al. 2009, 12).

Buchanan et al. (2009) also warn that workers in Australia are likely to encounter “profound paradoxes” from year to year, punctuated by “job famines” and “job feasts”. (Apple 2009, cited in Buchanan et al. 2009). As with other sectors of the economy, such paradoxical swings have already been occurring in the teacher labour market in recent years. Some teacher unions have called these supply swings a crisis, which impacts on the quality of public education in the state and puts enormous strain on those remaining in the classroom (e.g., State School Teachers Union WA 2010). Shortages, they argue, have lead to cancellation of certain subjects and programs, an increase in the prevalence of teaching out-of-field, a reduction in support personnel and professional development opportunities, leave entitlements being refused and pressures to train and employ teachers with less than a full teaching qualification (McConney and Price 2009).

Post 2000, these conditions are continuing and worsening as a result of what Hargreaves describes as ‘bigger, tighter, harder and flatter’ policy directions (Hargreaves 2009). Neo liberal education agendas according to Burbulus and Torres (2000, 15) are characterised by “particular policies for evaluation, financing, assessment, standards, teacher training, curriculum, instruction and testing.” Educational reform in this decade
has been driven by large-scale standardized curriculum and testing agendas such as the No Child Left Behind policy in the US and the Australian government’s so called ‘Education Revolution’ replete with a new national curriculum, national testing and national professional standards for teachers. These large-scale agendas require tighter controls over teachers and school leaders to ensure they are implemented according to the plan (Hargeaves 2009).

‘Bouncing back or resisting the adversity’ - future directions for pre service teacher education.

In this article we have argued that teachers’ work has become increasingly ‘adverse’ as a result of neo liberal policies that have both demanded ‘more for less’ from teachers and created conditions where teachers are increasingly casualised, deskilled and alienated from the labour process. Teacher stress and burnout, accompanied by high rates of early career teacher attrition, have resulted. One response has been to fund research and the development of programs to promote teacher resilience within pre service teacher education curriculum. We have argued that complex constructs like ‘teacher resilience’ should be carefully considered as they have the potential to shape teacher identity and the nature of teachers’ work, particularly if they are simplistically embedded in teacher professional standards documents and teacher education curriculum.

We contend that it is necessary to acknowledge that all such terms are social constructs. It is important to be mindful that the underlying meanings, the ‘cultural models’ or the ‘first
thoughts’ they evoke are not neutral but are constructed by research, media and public policy. Importantly, such constructs can be used to “drive policy formation in education and prevailing research in education based on rational organisational and management theories” (Burbules and Torres 2000, 18). We argue for the need to approach any new constructs within educational settings with a critical eye lest they surreptitiously become another mechanism to further control teachers.

This is not, however, to say that constructs like resilience should be simply cast aside. Just as the meanings underpinning the concept of teacher resilience may be used as a form of identity formation that further controls or alienates teachers from their work, so too can they be used to foster a more socially just workplace. Here again we are mindful that teachers are not simply passive receivers of identity imposed upon them but that they too can and do play a role in constructing their own identities. As Acker (1999, 19) puts it:

Teachers, like everyone else, are constituted (and position themselves) as subjects in discourse.

Teachers and teacher educators with consciousness about the way in which neo liberal policy agendas and ‘key words’ like ‘teacher resilience’ and ‘the good teacher’ can shape educational policy, their professional identity and the nature of their work, are in a better position to resist constructs that may serve to oppress them and develop others that enable them to negotiate ‘decent’ work that is more equitable and socially just.
This is not a simple task as there are constant pressures to align teacher education curriculum with public policy agendas dominated by neo liberal discourses. However, as national teacher professional standards are currently being implemented in Australia, this is an important time for teachers and teacher educators to critically engage with their impact and with the values that underpin them. Having a strong sense of efficacy, moral purpose, agency and effective collaborations can all be used to improve the conditions under which teachers work and ameliorate those factors that would serve to degrade, alienate and intensify their work. Reclaiming teachers’ professional judgement and ability to develop curriculum that meets the needs of the students in context rather than for narrowly defined economic objectives is a further example of the potential for positive outcomes of the current teacher resilience discourse. Equally, a healthy life work balance may be used to counteract demands for more time spent on the job and for the company and less with family and friends. So, while we have argued the need to view any constructs like teacher resilience critically, there is potential for the current discourses to potentially be productive.

It is our contention that the first years of teaching should not be so adverse that ‘the first years nearly killed me’. Neither should such constructs as ‘teacher resilience’ be taken for granted as a simple solution to early career teacher attrition rates. High attrition rates are the result of a number of complex socio economic factors including the deskilling and intensification of teachers’ work and the increasing levels of casualisation that characterise the current dominant economic structures. Engaging in discourses that shape the construct may be a way to resist such pressures. Critically minded teachers and teacher educators can forefront such issues in institutional and public debate. On the other
hand, if left unquestioned, such constructs could undermine possibilities of resistance to adverse conditions, through the creation of an identity that does not challenge adversity but simply learns to ‘bounce back’ from it.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of our colleagues Dr Susan Beltman, Dr Lina Pelliccione and Dr Marold Wosnitza in the development of this project.

Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this (report/publication/activity) do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

References


http://www.oecd.org/document/52/0,3343,en_2649_39263231_34991988_1_1_1_1_00.html#EO


Word Count 6454