

How Teachers Can Build Emotional Resilience

By Elena Aguila

"I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather."

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This quote by the Israeli educator, Haim Ginott, hung above my desk in my classroom. It often inspired me but was also a daunting reminder to manage my emotions. When I was exhausted or stressed out, my students' behavior deteriorated, which further exasperated my emotional state. On those days, I resented the suggestion that I was the decisive element.

The reality for those of us working in public schools is that our work is very, very stressful. At a breakneck speed we must perform a multitude of mentally and emotionally draining tasks. Add to that the pressures of high-stakes testing, cuts in education, constantly changing administrators, instructional initiatives and curriculum, and the poverty and violence, and sometimes it feels like it can't get any harder to work in this field.

This fall was rough for me. The challenges in our school seemed bigger and mightier than ever. In spite of how tired I felt, I also couldn't imagine doing anything else: I love my work. But I realized—at some low point in late October—that in order to forge on I needed to learn more about managing my emotions. While our working conditions need to be improved, that will take time. In the interim, we can change how we experience the stress; we can increase our emotional resilience. I suspect that if I did, I'd be more effective and feel better.

What Is Emotional Resilience?

Emotional resilience is defined as how you roll with the punches, how you handle and adapt to stressful situations. Emotionally resilient people understand what they're feeling and why. They persevere and believe that they are in control of their lives, and they are optimistic and believe in their own strength. They don't see themselves as victims and see obstacles as challenges and adversity as something that will make them stronger. In addition, emotionally resilient people tend to surround themselves with supportive friends and family, have a sense of humor, and are connected to their spiritual side.

As I explored this concept, what seemed critical was the notion that *emotional resilience can be developed*. While we're probably born with a certain amount of it, it can be grown, which is good news because I definitely would like as much as I can get. Teaching is hard, life is unpredictable; why not stock up on the stuff that might make it easier to manage?

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Our emotions are fundamental to our ability to be effective, and there's unanimous consent that our jobs are stressful. Our public schools struggle to retain effective teachers, especially in urban districts, where the average tenure is three years and turnover is constant in the neediest schools. The exceptionally high rates of teacher burnout have been **well-documented**, and many of the reforms of the last decade have only intensified stress levels. It needs to be said, as well, that it's equally hard for urban schools to retain highly effective principals: Their rates of stress and burnout are also astronomical.

It seems obvious, but if we are feeling depleted, confused, overwhelmed, or despairing, how can we possibly engage fully in a professional development session on backwards planning or academic literacy? Research tells us that when teachers are more relaxed, students are calmer, and the overall climate at a school can be transformed. When emotions are attended to, teachers' attention, concentration, and job satisfaction increase and relationships with colleagues improve. (See the report, "**Research on the Effect of the Inner Resilience Program on Teacher and Student Wellness and Classroom Climate**" for more information.)

There is a certain amount of responsibility we each hold for individually managing our emotions. But I would like to propose that administrators support their staffs in developing these essential skills. If I was the education czar, I would mandate that everyone working in schools have one component of their professional development—and a certain number of hours per year and minutes per meeting—allocated to developing emotional resiliency. If we really are going to transform our system, we need to start by attending to people's emotional experiences and well-being.

How Can Emotional Resilience Be Developed?

You've probably heard these suggestions for managing stress: keep a journal, develop positive self-talk, cultivate optimism and gratitude, expand social networks of support, meditate, sing, dance, paint and, of course, exercise! But in searching for specifics on stress and educators, I came across an **interesting 2004 study** on resiliency in urban teachers that offered some additional ideas. Here's a summary of the findings:

Resilient teachers:

1. Have personal values that guide their decision-making. They often feel they were "called" to this profession and a commitment to social justice keeps them in the classroom. (Interestingly, in response to questions on values, many teachers volunteered reflections on the importance of their spiritual beliefs and faith.)
2. Place a high value on professional development and actively seek it out.
3. Mentor others.
4. Take charge and solve problems.
5. Stay focused on children and their learning.
6. Do whatever it takes to help children be successful.
7. Have friends and colleagues who support their work emotionally and intellectually.
8. Are not wedded to one best way of teaching and are interested in exploring new ideas.
9. Know when to get involved and when to let go.

These findings suggest ways that administrators can take proactive steps to develop the emotional resiliency of their staff. For example, on the first finding—that a set of values guide resilient teachers—I have found that most teachers come into this profession because they feel "called" in some way to improve society. However, we often become so inundated with the demands of the work that we lose sight of what brought us in. Our passion and commitment fade and we become cynical. To prevent this slide, principals could provide times and structures for teachers to regularly share their belief systems with each other as well as stories of why they entered this profession, of the successes they've had and so on. We could refuel ourselves and inspire each other. It also suggests the high importance for schools to have working, living visions that exist outside of a statement on a paper.

If mentoring others develops resiliency, then this could be structured, supported, encouraged, and compensated, and not just left to individual initiative. And if having a say in guiding your own professional development increases resiliency, this is easy enough to do (and already happens in some schools).

Another key finding in this study is that resilient teachers have colleagues who support their work emotionally and intellectually. Principals can do a great deal to develop relational trust among their staff as this [study of 400 Chicago schools](#) shows. Trust has been called "the connective tissue that holds improving schools together." Organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley has [written beautifully on the impact](#) that having meaningful conversations and listening to each other can have in changing environments. Principals can ensure that these conversations happen. We can't support each other intellectually (or create Professional Learning Communities) if we don't trust each other.

Some of the traits of resilient teachers, such as knowing when to let go, are ones that I'll have to cultivate on my own. However, talking to colleagues about how to do it would only accelerate the process and increase motivation. Doing this kind of work in the community would have greater impact than doing it alone. I intend to approach my manager and offer to take a role in leading this work within the time allocated for our professional development. I encourage teachers to do the same: Provide principals with research and data, share resources and suggestions, and offer leadership.

Finally, it's not just teachers who need this kind of support: principals, administrators, coaches, counselors, superintendents, and many others would also benefit. We all contribute to the daily weather of a classroom, a school, and a district. We're all decisive elements.

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