

## **Riding the Waves of Change: Supporting Teacher Leadership and Resilience**

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**Abstract:** Teacher leadership is critical for building capacity and improving student learning. With the demands placed upon school principals, shared leadership is a necessary component of high performing schools. However, sustained teacher leadership is only possible if we attend to the well-being of teacher leaders, and the pandemic has brought significant challenges to teacher resilience. Through a partnership with thirteen school districts in our region, a council was created to provide a professional development opportunity for current and aspiring teacher leaders. Through this council, faculty from the university offered a seminar on building teacher leader resilience. Teacher leaders are continually faced with impediments to resiliency (daily stressors, lack of time, sickness, competing priorities, loss of control), but with intention, they can employ strategies to increase resilience. Attending to key areas of emotional intelligence positively impacts resilience and provides a path for teacher leaders to help colleagues develop greater resilience, too.

**KEYWORDS:** Professional Development Schools, PDSs, school-university partnerships, PDS research, PDS history, PDS definitions

### **NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

Essential 3: Professional Learning and Leading: A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.

### **Riding the Waves of Change: Supporting Teacher Leadership and Resilience**

Fostering the growth and development of teacher leaders is a vital aspect of building leadership capacity in schools. Seasoned teacher leaders are passionate educators, strong decision-makers, and ultimately have a high impact on student outcomes (Hattie, 2003). Supporting teacher leadership is an important role of school principals, district leaders, and university partners because a distributive leadership approach is necessary for successfully leading schools in the 21st century. Aligning teacher leadership opportunities with teacher interest and innovation allows teachers to feel more empowered to create lasting change for students (O’Shea, 2021). However, sustained teacher leadership is only possible if we attend to the well-being of teacher leaders, and the pandemic has brought significant challenges to teacher resilience.

Teaching has always required significant emotional investment, but the challenges of COVID-19 increased the emotional energy teachers needed to expend. The sudden switch to virtual teaching required new instructional approaches and new ways of building relationships with students. As teachers returned to the classroom, many returned to students needing more social and emotional support (Pressley et al, 2021). When motivating and engaging students became more challenging, many teachers experienced compassion fatigue (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2021). In order to effectively teach students impacted by trauma, teachers must develop their own emotional resilience.

### **Partnership Context**

Appalachian State University partners with 13 school districts/public school units in Western North Carolina through our Reich College of Education Public School Partnership (PSP). Meetings are held quarterly with a variety of key stakeholders making up our Public School Partnership Governing Board. This past year, the Public School Partnership jointly offered a Partnership Leaders Council professional development program to support and offer nurturing pedagogy to aspiring teacher leaders who plan to serve as leaders in their school districts.

This unique partnership between P-12 school districts and Appalachian State supports the overall growth and development of teacher leaders through programs such as the Partnership Leaders Council. The following article will describe an effort to support educator resilience as part of our partnership work. This work aligns with NAPDS Essential Standard #3, Professional Learning and Leading, as the program supports continuous professional learning for teachers. Such work is also guided by teacher interest and a desire to support one another through strong collaborations, respectful relationships, and teacher resilience practices.

### **A Unique Partnership**

The Appalachian State University Public School Partnership (PSP) was established in 1987 to improve education in the local and regional public schools. The PSP focuses on the enhancement of teacher preparation and the professional development of teachers. The PSP Governing Board meets quarterly and is currently composed of thirteen public school unit superintendents, the PSP Director, the Reich College of Education Dean, Associate Deans, and Assistant Dean, as well as the Director of the Mathematics and Science Education Center (MSEC) in the Reich College of Education and representation from the Northwest Regional Educational Service Alliance (NWRESA).

The mission of the PSP is to provide equitable resources and support for all educators and students. One aim is to ensure all students have access to high-quality teaching. In 2021-2022, the

PSP has focused on “Innovations for Equity,” by bringing stakeholders together to identify, elevate, collaborate and scale innovative approaches to educational needs. One intent is to create regional solutions to contextual challenges that help to ensure equitable solutions to topics such as teacher shortages that are faced by all. Developing teacher leaders is a crucial part of this mission, and much of that work was recently addressed through the work of the Partnership Leaders Council. Although the original purpose of the Partnership Leaders Council was to connect and grow educational leaders in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion through shared resources, professional development, and recruitment experiences, it became evident through small group breakout discussions and pre-assessment survey data that participants needed more focused time to develop their own capacity and resiliency to do this leadership work.

### **Partnership Leaders Council**

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the Partnership Leaders Council (PLC) provided a professional development opportunity to current and aspiring teacher leaders. The original intent was to focus on building teacher leadership capacity in partnering school districts. Led by a steering committee of faculty, staff members, and practitioners, quarterly sessions were offered to support teacher leadership growth. Participants completed an application process and were nominated by their university advisors or the superintendents in their districts. Each of the thirteen public school units contributed 3-5 interested teacher leaders for participation in the Partnership Leaders Council training program. The PLC quarterly sessions offered were focused on topics derived from a participant questionnaire; however, small group breakout conversations within those quarterly sessions often indicated a need for participants to dive deeper into matters of social and emotional wellness. Subsequently, the PLC leaders felt the need to provide more space and support for such topics. The leaders collected feedback in a survey that indicated a need for a session related to teacher leader resilience, as indicated by a response of 65% of participants wanting to explore this topic further.

### **Teacher Leader Resilience**

Teaching and leading are grounded in the building of caring relationships. Meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students has always required a high degree of emotional energy, but the demands of the work have intensified due to challenges related to COVID-19. Many teachers have experienced compassion fatigue and secondary trauma (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2021). Plagued by physical and emotional exhaustion, teachers may feel ill-equipped and may question their own competence. In order to meet the needs of those they teach and lead, teachers must attend to their own wellness and resilience. Resilience is the ability to adapt, cope, and rebound in the face of difficulty (Aguilar, 2018). Resilience is also a protective factor in mitigating stress, and it can be strengthened with intention and attention.

### **The Resilience Training Session**

In planning our session, we considered best practices in professional development and adult learning. Our teacher leader participants were self-directed and intrinsically motivated. The participants were P-12 pre-service and practicing teachers interested in leadership who volunteered and were recommended by their college advisors or their Superintendents. They came into our session with clear goals in mind, to acquire strategies for increasing their own resilience and to identify ways to lead their colleagues toward greater resilience. They wanted solutions that related

directly to their current professional challenges. Effective professional development emphasizes both active and interactive learning experiences (Hunzicker, 2011). Therefore, we, as two faculty members and the Director of Public School Partnership, planned a session that would involve them in discussion, problem-solving, and reflection related to their goals. We chose content and visual representations that would engage them cognitively and emotionally. Capitalizing on their prior knowledge, we integrated many opportunities for sharing their own experiences around resilience.

As leaders, knowledge of self and others is a powerful place from which to make decisions and respond to challenges. Understanding emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and habits is key to building resilience (Aguilar, 2018). With that in mind, we focused our session on concepts related to understanding and managing emotions. Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage emotions in ways that help relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and de-escalate conflict (Goleman, 1995). We chose to organize our session content around four key areas critical to building resilience: Self-awareness, Self-management, Social-awareness, and Relationship management.

### **Self-Awareness**

Self-awareness involves knowledge of different aspects of the self, including traits, behaviors, and feelings. It includes the ability to recognize and name emotions. According to sociologist Brene Brown (2021), in order to connect with others, we must first be connected with ourselves. Making sense of our own feelings and experiences requires knowing how emotions show up in our bodies, understanding the relationship between thoughts and emotions, and examining our reactions. When teachers develop awareness of their own emotions, they are better able to connect with students. Therefore, we included tools for naming and understanding emotions, such as Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions, in our session. Psychologist Robert Plutchik created Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions, which consists of 8 basic emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust (Plutchik, 2001). Each primary emotion has an opposite, and each emotion can exist in varying degrees of intensity. For example, anger is annoyance when it is least intense and rage when it is most intense. Emotions are complex, and being able to name distinct emotions is a helpful skill. With the increased demands brought on by COVID-19, teachers can benefit from attending to their own emotions.

### **Self-Management**

Self-management is the ability to recognize how emotions impact behavior. It allows leaders to make thoughtful decisions about how to respond to events rather than reacting. Psychologist Shauna Shapiro (2020) calls this practice "mindful pausing." A moment of pause between a stimulus and a response can make the difference between a thoughtful response and a regrettable reaction. However, pausing is easier said than done. The limbic system, which controls emotions, is typically the first to respond in a stressful situation, causing us to react automatically and quickly instead of slowly and thoughtfully. But a pause gives the reasoning prefrontal cortex time to get moving. A pause gives leaders the space to see a situation clearly and choose a response, rather than automatically reacting in ways that may not serve them, others, or the situation. In the midst of a busy school day, challenges are often dealt with expediently, but not always effectively. Increased demands brought on by COVID-19 tempt teachers to quickly move through the day without pausing. Therefore, we incorporated tools for practicing mindful pausing into our session. We also shared a practice of periodically checking in on emotional states by assessing feelings and

corresponding thoughts. We suggested that teacher leaders pair this exercise with another routine task, such as filling up a water bottle. Checking in on their own emotional states throughout the day allows leaders to make adjustments and move to a more powerful state (Aguilar, 2018).

### **Social Awareness**

Social awareness is the ability to accurately pick up on others' emotions and understand their states (Bradberry et al, 2009). This kind of empathy influences how teachers and leaders interact with students and colleagues and can help to build trust and strengthen relationships. Connecting with others in meaningful ways is a path to greater resilience (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2021). Therefore, we included several strategies for checking in with others in our session. For example, allowing a few minutes for each person to share celebrations and challenges at the beginning of a class or meeting can provide insight into emotional states. It's important to recognize that students and colleagues bring their whole selves into classrooms and schools, and events at home impact the ways they engage. Students needed additional empathy and support as they transitioned back into face-to-face instruction after school closures.

### **Relationship Management**

The quality of relationships influences the level of resilience, particularly when facing a crisis. The more quality social support teachers and leaders can draw upon from family and friends, the more flexible and resilient they can be in stressful situations (Goleman, 1995). Having a support system in place provides a greater sense of efficacy and optimism (Aguilar, 2018). Because relationships are the main source of quality social support, learning to care for and properly manage relationships is an essential skill for building resilience. A few committed high-quality relationships can provide more resilience-building support than dozens of superficial low-quality relationships. However, high-quality relationships require ongoing attention and maintenance. We encouraged session participants to consider prioritizing relationships by scheduling time to focus on significant family members and friends.

### **Supporting a Resilient Community**

An additional key area for teacher leaders to consider is how to foster a sense of community within the school. A thriving community is supportive, safe, and builds a sense of trust between its members. Leaders can support communities by encouraging members to understand their sphere of influence in their professional and personal lives. In other words, what are the things they can control, and what lies outside of their control? Supporting teacher resiliency means engaging in critical conversations about focusing on areas that *can* make the most impact. Conversely, worrying about areas beyond their control will drain teachers' energy. Reflecting on what is draining and what is energizing helps support resilience. Leaders can encourage teachers to let go of frustrating issues that are truly beyond their control and focus on those they can change (Aguilar, 2018). Time Management is also within an educator's control and is a crucial strategy to manage difficulties and maximize resilient outcomes (Mansfield et al., 2015). Building relationships, long-range planning, reflection, and teacher self-care are areas that teachers and leaders often forget to intentionally plan into their schedule (Robbins & Alvy, 2014). These activities support personal growth, organization, and resilience.

### **Results**

Each participant received a PLC journal and specific prompts to reflect after each session. Participants also were asked to submit a video reflection at the conclusion of the year-long program. Data collected as a result of the resilience presentation included anecdotal data from participants. Participant A stated, “This presentation was exactly what I needed tonight.” Other students felt like the presentation was timely and relevant to their present-day needs. They seemed to appreciate the time and space to reflect in a way that was helpful. Participant B stated, “I appreciated the time and space to reflect on my own resilience as it relates to my position as an educator.” Another participant was appreciative of the encouragement she received during the session, as it was helpful to hear that she was not the only one struggling with specific aspects of resiliency and that there were strategies she could use to help herself. Participant C was reminded to “take care of yourself, so you can take care of your people, you can't pour from an empty cup.” Participant D stated, “When we look at ourselves we understand our context and learn to build resiliency.” Several participants felt that the content was relatable and transferable. At the end of the session, participants chose one strategy to implement in order to focus on building their own resiliency. Students reflected on their plan to implement their new strategy in their individual journals.

### **Recommendations**

There continues to be a need for resilience training for teacher leaders and school administrators, as they strive to support students with multi-faceted needs as a result of Covid. Professional learning communities focused on increasing teacher resilience are a promising extension after a professional development session. Teachers involved in professional learning communities have reported a sense of renewal and recommitment to their students and the profession (Dallas, 2006). The structure itself serves to provide a greater sense of collegiality and less isolation. The community provides a means for conversations to help teachers understand and implement resilience-building strategies. Extending the learning around resilience in the context of a professional learning community is a recommended next step.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching and leading have always been challenging, but the pandemic has exacerbated those challenges. Physical and emotional exhaustion breeds feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. In order to meet the needs of those they teach and lead, teachers must attend to their own wellness and resilience. Teacher leaders are continually faced with impediments to resiliency (daily stressors, lack of time, sickness, competing priorities, loss of control), but with intention, they can employ strategies to support the development of resilience. Attending to key areas of emotional intelligence can positively impact resilience while assisting teacher leaders in helping those they teach and lead develop greater resilience, as well.

In response to the expressed needs of teacher leaders in our Partnership Leaders Council, we offered a session focused on strategies for building resilience. Teacher leadership offers the potential for providing equitable resources and support for all students in our partnership districts. However, sustained teacher leadership is only possible if we attend to the well-being of teacher leaders. Participants responded positively to our initial offering, and we plan to continue supporting the resilience of teacher leaders through future initiatives in our ongoing Public School Partnership.

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