REFEREED ARTICLE

Resiliency During COVID-19

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Abstract

As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the term "resiliency" has led to much discussion in many educational settings. Resiliency is a profound word and it is through further exploration of its meaning that I seek to garner new insights into what is needed in order to strengthen both student and teacher resiliency, and to provide suggestions for fostering resilience within the classroom in the face of future adversity.

My experience of teaching throughout the COVID -19 pandemic has been equivalent to the most difficult years of my teaching career. Like so many of my students and colleagues, I was faced with enduring months of public health orders, added anxiety and stress levels due to isolation and sickness, disruptions and challenges that included teaching remotely, in hybrid form, as well as transitioning back into the classroom full time. Throughout the past two years, I have observed a lack of motivation, disengagement, breakdown and increased levels of anxiety, depression and mental health issues among many of my students throughout the ongoing pandemic. My own personal experiences, and observations of my students, have led me to delve deeper into the notion of resilience. I worry that these ongoing, widespread problems will become insurmountable if school systems do not intervene and recognize the need to focus on student resiliency, and the overall health and wellness of students and teachers. Most concerning to me is that despite the lifting of public health protocols and the shift toward normalcy within the classroom, I continue to see a decline in the success and wellbeing of many students that I teach.

The Meaning(s) of Resiliency

The etymology of the word *resilience* dates back to the 1600s when it was referred to as an "act of rebounding or springing back, often of immaterial things, from Latin *resiliens*" or in other words "to rebound, recoil" (Resilience, n.d.). Although I believe that resiliency is anything but a simple term, in its most basic form it can be defined with a common day, dictionary definition as "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness" (Resilience, n.a.b). Many definitions of resilience include "the overcoming of stress or adversity or a relative resistance to environmental risk" (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013, p. 195). On a broader scale, the term *resilience* is "imbued with a multidimensional set of meanings that evoke mental, emotional, and spiritual insight, resolve, foresight, strength, and fortitude in an individual and in a communal social context" (Almedom, 2015, p. 708).

What is interesting to me is that there is an "epistemological pluralism" that arises in comprehending what it means to be or become resilient, when human resilience is expressed through first person narratives, observations by onlookers, or communicated by experts (Almedon, 2015, p. 709). From an educational standpoint, I have come to understand that resilience is loosely regarded as "a set of attitudes and behaviors which are associated with an individual's ability to recover from adversity and also to actively adapt in the face of these adversities and stress" (Robbins et al., 2018, p. 44). Johnson and Howard (1999) regarded resilience as "the inherent and nurtured capacity of individuals to deal with life stressors in ways that enable them to lead healthy and fulfilling lives" (p. 3). Could it be possible that this nurturing capacity lies within a classroom or educational setting for some students? What role might

teachers play in this nurturing capacity? As a teacher, I am compelled to think of how my experience in the field of education might guide me in further understanding resilience in students. Brogan (2020) suggested that "experience is an engagement in the ongoing process of life that involves interpretation and thus a productive repetition that exposes what we know to new meaning," whereas "experience is the realization that the present is not a closed and finished state but a reality that opens out onto past and future" (p. 5).

The Teacher's Experience

Admittedly, for much of my teaching career, and prior to COVID-19, I often equated resiliency in students to those who faced trauma, abuse, poverty and marginalization, with the assumption that there would always be students in my class who had been touched by such disparity and injustice throughout their lifetime. I was also cognizant of the challenges and barriers that many students face as they move from junior high to the high school, equating this to a sense of resiliency, and recognizing the adaptations that sponsored students must make when they move away from their outlying home communities in northern Manitoba in order to attend high school at R. D. Parker Collegiate in Thompson, Manitoba. Moules et al. (2015) would explain that "when a term becomes widely assumed and taken for granted, it starts slipping away from us, unnoticed in plain sight like a comfortable pair of shoes" (p. 156). It wasn't until I found myself in the midst of being tested by my own resilience to adversity throughout the pandemic that I truly began to question how and why some students seemingly coped well, while others continuously struggled throughout the pandemic. Upon much reflection, I began to think more deeply into my shared experiences alongside my students throughout the pandemic. The irony of the situation was that, although I felt a sense of togetherness with my students, simultaneously the pandemic created a sense of isolation like I had never experienced before in regards to my interactions with some of my family, colleagues, and friends. I began to further question my understanding of the term *resilience*. As Gadamer (2000) explained, "(u)nderstanding begins … when something addresses us" (p. 299).

As a science teacher caught in the thick of the pandemic with my students, I struggled to "actively champion resilience" (Theron, 2016, p. 91) like teachers are often equated with, and respected as doing. Although I would show up to each online or in-person class and put on a cheerful face, I too began losing motivation, and optimism. My understanding of resiliency became entwined with the notion of coping, adapting, and surviving. How is possible to decipher these terms from one another? I soon began to question whether resiliency is inherent in all individuals, and whether it can be regarded as an aspect of being human.

I vividly remember the group of students that I was teaching in the spring of 2020, when we were unexpectedly forced to shift our teaching and learning online. I referred to those students at the time as my "COVID kids," and I assured them that I would never forget them or our lived experiences together. One semester turned into two, and here we all are two years later to tell our stories of these surreal teaching and living experiences. When I think about my relationship with these former students, I understand that we were all tested with something "inherently difficult and transformative in the act of becoming experienced in the ways of the world" (Moules et. al., 2013, p. 5), and from such a process none of us could be exempt (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355). Initially, I believed that we would all persevere through the challenges of COVID-19, and anticipated that the pandemic would end sooner than later. Through lived experience, I soon realized that we would not all spring back as easily as I once thought that we would. Echoing the words of Hannah Arendt, "never has our future been more unpredictable" (1973, p. vii). I dwell on this thought, as it seems timeless. It became apparent to me that with so much uncertainty, it was impossible to know what the future would hold, and how long we would need to endure the ongoing challenges. I questioned the sustainability of hybrid teaching and online learning, cohorts, my newfound roles of cleaning and sanitizing my classroom, and the balance of my work and family. I questioned whether students were falling behind, or if that

was even possible when they were all enduring the pandemic at the same pace. I questioned my effectiveness as a teacher and as a parent. Despite all of these ongoing questions, I continue to teach, and continuously look back on where I was, and where I am today.

The Student's Experience

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of my students participated in remote learning activities and engaged in discussions, though over time their participation dwindled, their motivation began to wane, and a sense of despair began to set in. Currently, a number of my students continue to struggle and display similar difficulties in regulating their emotions. Some students are pre-occupied with their electronic devices and cell phones, while others can best be described as being present in class, though choosing not to participate in the ongoing of daily tasks and activities. Prior to COVID-19, many of these students were regarded as vibrant students, eager to learn. In addition to this, while public health protocols have lifted within the province of Manitoba, and students are no longer required to wear a mask or social distance, I continue to observe students with high anxiety who find it difficult to interact with other students and participate in activities when they are still fearful of contracting the virus.

Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, there was a widespread sense of defeat, rather than toughness that settled in as further public health orders were put in place, and students were forced to become even more isolated from one another. From mask wearing to social distancing, it became nearly impossible for students to socialize in a fashion that they were used to. Traditional graduation and prom ceremonies became a thing of the past, and consequently a number of students chose not to engage in their remote graduation ceremonies. Students appeared to be mourning the loss of what their peers had celebrated in previous years. With continual disruptions to both in class and remote learning due to isolation and sickness, many students were simply unable to cope with the content that they had missed. In addition, students were required to adjust to a hybrid teaching/learning system that was developed by our school administration, whereby students attended combined online classes on Wednesdays, and in person learning on their respective cohort days (Monday and Tuesday or Thursday and Friday). The online learning continued to pose great stress on those who did not have the technology required to participate in our Google Meet sessions. For those who did participate, very few turned their cameras on, placing additional pressure on teachers to provide adequate lesson plans and learning opportunities. Pinar (2021) noted that the pandemic "pressed educators to rethink, restructure, and reimagine what curriculum is and can be" (p. 301). Comparably, I began to feel a sense of disconnect with students when I was not able to see their faces, or read their body language and level of resiliency. At this point in time, it became increasingly more difficult to connect, engage, and interact with students, despite all attempts by the school and teachers to provide support. In the eyes of Pinar (2021), "the COVID-19 crisis is a curriculum crisis because it is a humanitarian crisis. Survival-physical, psychological, educational-is at stake" (p. 300).

Widespread concerns regarding the health and wellbeing of students across all grade levels began to emerge by the end of the first year of the pandemic. "Large-scale national research indicates that the pandemic has prompted a decline in children's emotional wellbeing" (Sharp & Nelson, 2021, p. 2). Sharp & Nelson (2021) identified numerous additional behaviors that seemingly emerged as a result of the pandemic, impacting aspects of student resiliency: elevated anxiety and depression, reduced cognitive abilities, lack of motivation and withdrawal, poor social skills, stressed relationships among peers, broken friendships, sleep loss, reduced physical fitness, as well as speech and oratory delays. Notably, within my own classes, there continued to be an increase in disengagement, and lack of attendance as the pandemic progressed.

What is profound to me is that "the same environmental insults" to the human body can impact individuals in a number of ways, in that a student could be considered "resilient for

certain outcomes but not for others" (Bowes & Jaffee, 2013, p. 196). I observed this phenomenon in that some students who were terrified that they would contract the virus, quickly became quite comfortable in wearing masks and social distancing throughout the pandemic, thus increasing their sense of resiliency. These students appeared to be comfortable in isolating from others, as they felt a sense of security and safety in not interacting with their peers. In other cases, there were some students who were greatly impacted by other aspects of the pandemic such as the isolation requirements, fueling their pre-existing mental health and anxiety issues, and reducing their resiliency. Moreover, some students appeared to have their level of resiliency challenged by remote learning as they struggled with emotional regulation and confidence in working with technology, while other students appeared to be well accustomed to these newfound learning environments and platforms of technology. Bowes and Jaffee (2013) further noted that "how an individual responds to an external stressor will depend on the complex interplay between a multitude of factors, relating both to individual characteristics (including genetic factors) and to the broader environment" (p.196).

Implications for the Future

Education systems must brace for the long-term impacts that COVID-19 has placed on both students and teachers. The reality is that "harsh environments that challenge our species survival and interconnected social-ecological, socio-cultural and geophysical sustainability challenges will continue to draw attention to human resilience in all its dimensions" (Almedom, 2015, p. 709). While resilience can be regarded as complex and interpretive in nature, it is also situational, and it may continually change over the course of time. I believe that education systems have a responsibility to look more closely at the notion of resilience within students and teachers, on a continual basis, not just in response to COVID-19. We can no longer assume that students or teachers are fine. We cannot ignore the reality that we have all endured teaching and learning throughout a worldwide pandemic, in knowing that life as we once knew it, will never be quite the same. However, most school districts within Canada have been unsuccessful in documenting "the extent of the damage, as few have assessed what students have and have not learned" since the initial school closures in the spring of March 2020 (Pinar, 2021, p. 307). While there is a dire need to prioritize the mental health and wellbeing of students and teachers as we move forward, there is arguably the concern regarding what the impact of missed curriculum content might be on students as a result of COVID-19. The assurance of education and "the promise of curriculum, particularly as the international community navigates the COVID crisis, lies in the potential enactment of curriculum as a complicated conversation that investigates the intersected social, political, economic, educational and environmental issues illuminated by the pandemic itself" (Burns & Cruz, 2021, p. 222). Pinar (2015) would ask the key curriculum question, what knowledge matters most in these historical times? The question of knowledge of most worth becomes "an ongoing question, as the immediacy of the historical moment, the particularity of place, and the singularity of one's own individuality become articulated through the subject matter-history, poetry, science, technology-that-one studies and teaches" (Pinar, 2015, p. 32).

I propose that now is the time for sweeping curriculum reform, with cross-curricular outcomes becoming infused with inquiry and opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of their own historicity, culture, and traditions, in hopes of becoming more empathetic and compassionate human beings. Certainly, the past two years have been a test of human resiliency, and this will not be our last test. I believe that teachers should strive to facilitate ongoing opportunities for students to explore the meaning of their shared, lived experiences, and their own understandings of resilience through a variety of ways such as poetry, song, story, dialogue, and most importantly conversation.

Throughout the past two years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, both students and teachers have changed and morphed into new beings with new understandings of the world

around them. Personally, I have changed the ways in which I approach my students in the classroom, but I have also expanded upon my teaching strategies to involve more personal reflection, and inquiry-based activities. I listen more carefully and feel as though I am becoming more attuned with my students in terms of their insecurities, needs, and level of resiliency. I believe that all teachers can provide meaningful opportunities for their students to improve upon student embodiment and self-awareness, thus strengthening resilience. Historicity, traditions and culture can and should be explored by providing opportunities for students to engage with others in hopes of better understanding one another's horizon and learning to appreciate differences.

"Structured by guidelines, focused by objectives, overdetermined by outcomes, the school curriculum struggles to remain conversation. It is conversation-efforts at understanding through communication-among students and teachers, actually existing individuals in certain places on certain days, simultaneously personal and public" (Pinar, 2015, p. 110). I believe that these complex and often cumbersome conversations must continue to happen within schools: between and among administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the greater community. We must all ask the questions of where have we been and where are we now? What has changed within the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and how do we respond to those changes? What knowledge have we gained, and what do we aspire to further understand?

Conclusion

I have come to an understanding that resiliency is of complex nature. Although some students may appear to be coping well within the confines of a teacher's classroom, exhibiting success in their academics and in their social relationships, they may be struggling in other aspects such as in their sleep patterns, their family support networks, or their physical and mental health – all of which a teacher may not be aware of. I see myself in these students, struggling in ways that they are unable to see in me. For me, it is these situations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that have provoked new understandings of student resiliency and the "fecundity of the individual case" (Jardine, 1992, p. 51). Jardine (1992) would describe such incidents as those that "have a generative and re-enlivening effect on the interweaving texts and textures of human life in which we are all embedded" (p. 51). I have been "struck" by the inconsistencies of resilience throughout the pandemic, in that in these particular cases, "the unanticipated eruption of long-familiar threads of significance and meaning in the midst of a wholly new situation" (Jardine, 1992, p. 55) have tested my understanding of resilience as I once knew it. I seek to further understand how one might find meaning in why students are not coping, not adjusting, and not moving forward with success.

Most recently, I have found myself in a difficult space in that I question what is required in order for my students to strengthen their resilience. Though I have found understanding in the term *resilience*, I seek to find further meaning in why students have responded to the pandemic in differing ways in terms of their resilience and I wonder how I can play a role in offering support to help students move forward with success within my own classroom.

I have come to recognize that before students can move forward with success, it is important to seek a better understanding of what the underlying meaning of their resiliency may be, in hopes of providing adequate supports if necessary. The COVID-19 pandemic has reconceptualized my understandings of what it means to be resilient. Moreover, and on a personal and professional level, although I have been tested on all accounts throughout the past two years, I feel that through learning alongside my students I have come to appreciate every small success in life, and to be hopeful for what the future brings.

Postscript

Sammel (2003) explained understanding as not to read or hear an individual "correctly," but rather in "finding out about ourselves through what emerges in the middle and center of dialogical interplay" (p. 160). I recently presented a poem about resiliency to one of my senior level biology classes, and invited them to respond in written form as to what their understanding of the word *resilience* meant to them, perhaps in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. What was most profound to me is that although all of the students endured the pandemic, their responses were symbolic of who they are as individuals, and they reflected different comprehensions of resilience. Some students responded to the COVID-19 pandemic directly, while others alluded to their understanding of resilience in relation to various other experiences that they had encountered throughout their lifetime. This activity confirmed for me that resilience is complex, and interpretive in nature. In the words of my grade 11 biology students –

Resilience is
- "the ability to do something hard without being stopped"
- "being strong enough to stand up for what you believe in and not letting anyone alter or change your belief or opinion"
- "coming back from something that damaged or hurt you"
- "encountering an undesired situation and not giving up"
- "doing everything with pride and never giving up, always having the mental power to do something and doing it in style"
- "the task of recovering from difficulties and having toughness"
- "trying and trying again until you accomplish whatever it is that you are trying to do"
- "the motivation to move forward to try to do your best to pass any challenge that comes your way"
- "responding to something negative in a positive way"

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