

# Teacher Resilience from the Perspective of Occupational Health Psychology

*Tom Cox and Amanda Griffiths*

Seminar Two: Oxford

Occupational health psychology is concerned with the contribution of applied psychology to occupational health issues. That concern largely focuses on the contribution of psychological, social and organizational processes to the aetiology of work-related health problems and to their solution (Cox et al, 2000). Much of occupational health psychology is vested in the overlap between work and organisational psychology, on the one hand, and occupational health on the other. Work-related stress is a central concept. There are two contrasting approaches obvious in occupational health psychology: the systems or organisational level approach, often associated with issues of prevention, and the individual level approach which has a much stronger focus on issues of treatment, care and rehabilitation. Arguably, in Europe the systems or organisational level approach is stronger than it is in North America. Within this framework, the authors see teacher resilience as a topic intrinsically and intimately related to those of teacher stress and health and adopt an organisational level approach with the application of, what might be loosely termed, systems thinking to the key issues. Their approach is, like much of occupational health psychology, framed by three philosophies; those of empiricism, pragmatism and functionalism. It is also committed to the evidence-based problem solving paradigm in dealing with issues and emphasises the importance of its methodologies being "fit for purpose" (Cox et al, 2007).

They argue strongly that both the experience of stress and the degree of resilience are partly, even largely, determined by the nature, design and management of teachers' work in the context of the school, the community and the Education Authority. This argument draws heavily on the notion of the healthiness of schools with respect to the task, problem solving and development environments that they offer (Cox et al, 1989). The general argument in relation to work, stress and health has been set out in Cox (1993) for the Health & Safety Executive and by Cox, Griffiths and Rial-Gonzalez (2000) for the European Agency for Safety & Health at Work. Both these publications, and more recent ones (Cox and Griffiths, 2010; Leka, Griffiths and Cox 2003; Leka and Cox, 2008) both generally and for the World Health Organisation and the European Commission describe a risk management approach to reducing work-related stress through the improvement of work design and management which, the authors argue, is applicable here to the issue of teacher resilience.

The authors strongly believe that it is important not to take solely an individual perspective or one of blame (or blaming) when attempting to understand and manage issues of teacher stress and resilience. Their previous statement set out their position on three key issues: the legal and moral responsibilities of schools, communities and Education Authorities under statutory health and safety and disabilities discrimination legislation, their responsibilities under our common law duty of care, and, finally, the responsibilities of pupils, parents and communities to show respect for and support of the education system. The notion of an appropriate social contract was introduced.

Following the first workshop in Nottingham, a secondary clusters of issues emerged: they concern the nature of the core concept and of the evidence available to test out that concept either through research or evaluated interventions.

First, in relation to the core concept which is teacher resilience, the authors argue that we should be very specific about what this is and how we define it. The danger is that without such precision in definition, we cannot operationalise the concept in the way that it can be studied scientifically and that this failure will hamper our efforts to understand it better and to solve problems relating to it. Furthermore, without precise and proper definition, the concept will be lost in a cluster of other longer established and well researched notions such as stress resistance, teacher stress and burn out, coping and well being. This is part of the challenge for the Oxford seminar.

The second, in relation to methodology, the authors are eclectic in their approach to all issues preferring a properly blended combination of appropriate and properly applied qualitative and quantitative approaches

over a rigid commitment to one particular method. Three things define their approach, which recognises the shortcomings of the natural science paradigm (Griffiths, 1999; Cox et al, 2007): a commitment to the philosophy and strategies of a scientific approach to evidence collecting and summary, the use of an evidence-based problem solving paradigm to frame their studies; and a commitment to their methods being "fit for purpose". It is hoped that such an eclectic approach will allow the diversity of interests and methods represented in this ESRC seminar series to flourish together and meaningfully exchange information.

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